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ROBERT BROWNING

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ROBERT BROWNING

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

PERHAPS the most striking characteristic alike of Browning's personal character and of his poetry is his intense individuality, his independence of external influences. Sociable and affectionate, and including among his friends men and women of strong personality, his nature nevertheless remained little affected by contact with others. Only his wife touched the essentials in his character ; and her influence did not so much modify his personality as awaken in it emotions and powers previously undeveloped, give it the atmosphere of finest sympathy and the stimulus of deepest feeling which made it more magnificently itself. And this same independence marks Browning's work. His intellectual sympathies were singularly wide ; his culture was cosmopolitan, though most friendly to the influences of his beloved Italy ; painting, music, history, politics, all fascinated him, and his literary sympathies, despite certain marked insensibilities, were rich and varied. But all these influences merely gave new force to his genius without definitely informing its temper. As a boy he consciously imitated Byron ; his earliest published work shows clearly the influence of

Shelley and less clearly that of Keats ; later he deliberately tried to modify his poetic method under the influence of his wife's. But such influences remained superficial ; we feel that he hails intellectual or spiritual affinities, never, after *Pauline*, that he borrows from them. We may link him with Euripides in fine humanity, with Aristophanes in burly energy united with admirable nimbleness, with Dante, and still more definitely with Shelley in sense of the supreme revealing power of love, with Chaucer in cheerful gusto for life, with the Elizabethan dramatists in limitless interest in the soul of man, with Goethe in wide culture and massiveness of mind, with Balzac and Dickens in power of apprehending the significance of the grotesque and apparently trivial in character. The list might be extended to include still more of the great names of literature, for Browning's genius is wonderfully many-sided. But this is to note resemblances, not to suggest an actual relation. Occasionally some detail bears the mark of a definite influence, but after his early work even this grows rare. It is possible to say, "Here Chaucer owes something to Boccaccio, or Goethe to Shakespeare, or Shelley to Godwin ;" it is not possible to point to any element in Browning's mature work and say, "Here is a debt to another man."

Poetry, like every art, gives expression to individual experience, individual thought or emotion or perception. Even when it strives to express universal experience, or again merely to record the significance of some object, the experience or the object must be presented as the poet perceives and conceives them. And the expression will be understood only by those who have

common ground with the poet, who can see what he sees, and feel what he feels, when he has pointed the way.

The poet is popular who gives expression to what many people think and feel; whose interests are common to many, and whose method of expression is attractive to the general reader, and easy to understand. This is the explanation of the popularity of, for example, Mrs. Ella Wheeler Wilcox. To take an example on a higher plane, more readers enjoy the *Idylls of the King* than enjoy *Maud*, because the *Idylls* are comparatively commonplace. They shed the light of beautiful expression over the shallows of familiar thought.

(The greatest poets are those whose vision of life is so wide as well as deep, and whose power of expression is so great, that they offer something to every sincere mind; they interpret universal experience in such a way that the most ordinary experience finds itself comprehensibly and significantly expressed, while deeper and ever deeper meanings await the reader who can share them.) Hence it is that *Hamlet*, while its uttermost values lie beyond the reach of any mind less great than Shakespeare's, is still able to hold the attention of auditors so various in type and qualities of mind as an average theatre audience.)

Only the supremely great, however, make this universal appeal. Most great poets speak only to some part of their fellows, to those who are akin to them in emotional and imaginative and intellectual characteristics; for the rest their words are meaningless, at least on first hearing. Beauty perfect alike in colour and form may appeal to the colour-blind by its form, to

those deficient in sense of form by its colour. So the most complete art finds some channel of appeal to all. But how can the artist whose power lies wholly in revealing beauty of colour appeal to the colour-blind ? He may be a master in his limited sphere, and his colour-blind spectator may have a perfect appreciation of form ; but they have no common ground, and so this artist's genuine revelation is meaningless to this spectator. Probably the spectator proclaims somewhat angrily that it has no meaning or beauty, because he can see none, and it is easier to denounce a deficiency in another than to admit it in oneself. And so it is in poetry. Burns writes magnificent love songs, but these cannot appeal to a reader entirely passionless ; Wordsworth reveals the secret powers of nature, but he cannot teach every reader to feel them ; Shelley prophesies gloriously of love and liberty, but he has no way of approach to the ascetic disciple of law ; Maeterlinck lifts the veil of the mystic world of the soul, but the materialist finds him merely silly. As we have said, the greatest art offers something to every type of mind, and so the limited mind may be drawn through the familiar to apprehend something of the unfamiliar. So Shakespeare leads our common human nature into the infinite. But it is absurd to complain, and self-stultifying to turn away, because other work has not this universal range. If we cannot immediately find points of contact with an artist, it is our business to try to develop the quality which our failure proves to be deficient in us. We should seek to share the artist's point of view, not deny its worth because it is not habitually our own. The common tendency, however, is to avoid the effort, and

to care only for the art which harmonises with our normal experience ; and it is also possible that even with effort, the new experience lies beyond reach of our powers. The more persuasively it is expressed, the more easily shall we share it, if we can share it.

(Browning, we have said, was a man and a poet of very marked individuality. That is to say that his imaginative experiences were also marked off from those of most other men. Even if they had found perfectly lucid and attractive expression, their immediate appeal would still have been limited. And the expression which Browning gave to them is often difficult.) Like a great scholar who lacks the gift of teaching, this great master of imaginative experience remains a meaningless voice to many because he could not find the expression to bridge the gulf between his knowledge and their comparative ignorance. His education emphasized the difference, for it was informal and unorthodox ; he forgot that the curious byways of knowledge so familiar to him were strange to others, and flung off allusions where explanations were needed. His sinewy and athletic mind leaped in the pursuit of truth from idea to idea, without marking for feebler and less experienced followers the intermediate footholds by which they could climb in his track. And he is disturbingly unconventional in the form of his work. Sometimes his thoughts go forth into the world like angels clad in rags or in motley. When he chooses he can clothe them in decent citizen broadcloth, or in the pomp of purple, or in white simplicity. When he is most perfectly poet he lets them weave for themselves the veil which makes clear the form of their radiant beauty. The same poet wrote *Pacchiarotto* and *Pippa Passes*, *Mr. Sludge the*

Medium and *The Boy and the Angel*, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* and the book of *Pompilia*.

It is no great wonder, then, that Browning is not a poet whom most people love at first reading. Many are unlucky in their point of attack : they begin perhaps on *Sordello*, and give up Browning. Others wish to find in him what they already love in other poets, instead of seeking what he has to give. The business of this book is to suggest what Browning offers, and its value. Quotation on an adequate scale is impossible, and criticism without the text is worthless. The reader must turn constantly to the poems ; and I strongly recommend the *Selections* published by Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co. as the best material for introductory study and admirable for familiar use at any stage. Probably most of the readers of this little book already know something of Browning's work ; but I hope that it may also introduce to some new readers the poet whom I count second, in English, only to Shakespeare. Such readers I advise to reserve Chapters III, IV, and V, and to concentrate their attention on some of the shorter poems until they know these well. To suit this plan, I have written the two chapters on "General Characteristics" with constant reference to poems in the *Selections*, in the hope that the reader will turn at once to the text, and have given them an early place instead of letting them serve a summary and conclusion. In the responsibility of such an opportunity to spread interest in Browning, I find my justification for disguising a pedagogic preface as a first chapter. Pill-vendors seem to find such arts profitable and, with General Booth, I don't see why the dev. should have all the good tunes.

CHAPTER II

LIFE, 1812-1845

THREE main motives tempt to the study of a great artist's biography. It attracts us as a human document presumably unusually interesting. It stirs the piety which venerates the least circumstance or thing connected with a great man—a feeling not too hastily to be mocked in an age little prone to hero-worship. Finally, and this is the chief motive of the critic, it throws light on the artist's personality, supplementing the expression given to it by his work. The third motive alone can justify the biographer of Browning; for he protested repeatedly and most vigorously against intrusion on the artist's private life (see, for example, the poems *Shop*, *House*, *At the Mermaid*). He even denied the right of the poet's audience to seek knowledge of his personality beyond that which he offers in his work :

“Here's the work I hand, this scroll,
Yours to take or leave ; as duly,
Mine remains the unproffered soul.”

But when Browning himself for a moment turns critic, in the fine essay on Shelley, he admits the value of biography towards appreciation of a poet's work ; above all if the poet be one who has to do “not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity,” and who “digs where he stands, preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak.” Such a poet is Browning. We can say of his work what he

says of Shelley's : it is "the very radiance and aroma of his personality, projected from it but not separated. Therefore, in our approach to the poetry, we necessarily approach the personality of the poet ; in apprehending it we comprehend him, and certainly we cannot love it without loving him."

Browning's life, considered thus, is instructive chiefly as corroborating the evidence of his personality offered by his poems. There is little in his life which is not found at a higher power in his work. To know only the literary work of Sidney, or Bacon, or Milton, or William Morris, is to know only half the man, for these men expressed themselves potently in deeds as well as in words. To know Browning's poetry is to know the essential Browning. Of the external events of his life, then, comparatively little need be said ; and in selecting facts for a brief record, those directly bearing on his work must be preferred to general biographical information which might be more immediately interesting.

Browning's family appear first, in the sixteenth century, as prosperous yeomen in Wessex. This good, sturdy, Philistine stock is well represented by the poet's grandfather, who worked his way up to high office in the Bank of England, took active part in its armed defence during the Gordon Riots, and satisfied his literary tastes by reading from end to end every year *Tom Jones* and the Bible. Hence we can understand the massive common-sense of Browning, good citizen as well as great poet, least Bohemian of artists. Luckily common-sense married imagination, and Browning's father (named Robert, like the grandfather) shows a finer strain with no loss of sturdiness. He loved books and pictures and music ; still more he loved freedom

and righteousness. He refused to accept a living from the slave-labour of his mother's West Indian estates, though the refusal drew upon him disinheritance, and drove him from his life of connoisseurship to the ledgers of the bank. Browning's points of resemblance in character to his father are obvious. Physically he was more like his mother, the strong simplicity and intense spirituality of whose character was also fruitful in the richer and more complex nature of her son. "A divine woman" Browning calls his mother.

Robert Browning was born at Camberwell on May 7, 1812. He grew up in the happiest and most stimulating of home atmospheres. His early desire for something to do, something to look after, was allowed to satisfy itself on a most miscellaneous collection of pets—frogs, owls, monkeys, snakes, and other "fearful wild-fowl," which he cherished tenderly. "To get rid of his turbulent activity for an hour or two every morning and afternoon," his parents sent him very soon to a small private school; and after a second such school, he passed into a very good preparatory school, where he remained until he was fourteen. As far as formal instruction is concerned, his education was completed by private tutors, except for a course in Greek at University College, London. But even in his boyhood, formal instruction counted far less towards his development than his father's guidance among his books and portfolios, and in the Dulwich gallery, close to their home. He ranged widely in his reading (one recalls Dickens), fastening with interest on the letters of Junius and Horace Walpole, the works of Voltaire, and above all—strange, tough food for a boy's mind—the poetry of Francis Quarles. Even thus early we may recognise his

characteristic love of intellectual force and of fantastic imagination. Like most imaginative children, though more precociously and more persistently, he attempted verse. "I never can recollect *not* writing rhymes, but I knew they were nonsense even then," he wrote later to Elizabeth Barrett; and he tells her how at five years old he attempted formal composition in imitation of "Ossian." At twelve, under the influence especially of Byron, he produced a volume of short poems, never published and soon destroyed. At fourteen, he discovered Shelley, and at once fell under the influence so potent in *Pauline*, and apparent still in *Paracelsus*. About the same time he became acquainted with the work of Keats, and through it learned to appreciate sheer beauty as well as power.

Under these influences, he chose his career, dedicating himself to poetry; but no young poet ever was less of a Bunthorne. Like every young man of independent mind, he had his periods of whim: now he was an atheist, now a vegetarian;¹ but such fancies passed quickly. He remained wonderfully normal, sane, and sociable. He learned dancing, and boxing, and riding with as much gusto as Greek, and varied his poetic ambitions by efforts after a diplomatic career. Apart from the guidance of his father and his tutors, the libraries and picture-galleries of London gave Browning his preliminary education; Italy was his university. The informal character of his education tended to widen the intellectual gulf between him and the average educated man.

¹ I beg any vegetarian reader not to imagine a gibe where none is intended. Certainly for Browning vegetarianism was merely a caprice.

Browning's earliest extant work is the "Fragment of a Confession," *Pauline*, published anonymously in 1833. It found a just critic, and gained its author a friend, in W. J. Fox, editor of *The Monthly Repository*; but it attracted no general attention. The poem is only now gaining the place to which its great beauties entitle it, in spite of its immaturity of conception, its vagueness of arrangement, and its inequality of style. The same zest for the study of psychological development, the same fine seriousness and nobility of thought, mark *Paracelsus*, published in 1835. Like the poet-hero of *Pauline*, the student Paracelsus fails to realize his ideals because he is too self-centred. He trusts too much in his own intellect, he is slow to learn the worth of love, he lacks faith in his fellow-men. Yet from his failure he learns why he failed, and thus gains an earnest of ultimate achievement, though not in this life. It is significant that Browning chooses, as the figure through which to set forth these conceptions, the great sixteenth-century Swiss, half scientist, half charlatan; a personage who loomed only vaguely in the general educated mind, fantastic, somewhat questionable. We shall see how frequently he returns to this type—the very mixed character, the prophet whose flame is not all pure, or the impostor who is half sincere.

Paracelsus was scarcely better calculated than *Pauline* to win him popularity; but its art is far more mature, and it gained him reputation among those whose praise was best worth having. John Forster wrote a telling appreciation of it in the *Examiner*, and soon became personally friendly with the poet. About this time, too, Browning made the acquaintance of Sergeant Talfourd, Leigh Hunt, Monckton Milnes, Dickens,

Wordsworth, Walter Savage Landor, and other famous men. The removal of his family from Camberwell Hatcham made them neighbours of Carlyle, who quickly yielded his stubborn barriers before the young poet's great personal charm. Most important of all for Browning's immediate literary production, he met Macready. The monodramatic form of *Pauline*, the dialogue form of *Paracelsus*, already indicated Browning's bias. His interest in the stage was heightened both by the acting and the personal influence of Macready. In his diary, under February 16, 1836, Macready noted "Forster and Browning called, and talked over the plot of a tragedy which Browning had begun to think of : the subject, Narses." We hear no more of Narses, but on May 26th, Browning was a guest at a supper-party given by Sergeant Talfourd after the first night of his play *Ion*, in which Macready had scored a great success ; and in answer to Macready's "Write a play, Browning," he answered, "What do you say to a drama on Strafford ?" Browning had been giving his friend Forster some help in a biography of that great and unfortunate statesman, and his instinct for the dramatic kind evidently seized on the possibilities of the tragic story. Macready's support ensured and hastened the execution of his conception, and he laid aside other work (*Sordello*) to write the play. *Strafford* was produced at Covent Garden on May 1, 1837, with Macready in the title-role and Helen Faucit as the Countess of Carlisle. After running for five nights with moderate but increasing success, it had to be abandoned because the actor who played Pym threw up his part. The fact deserves mention, since the poor success of *Strafford* may have helped to make Macready doubtful of the success

A Blot in the 'Scutcheon (1843). He behaved very unsatisfactorily over the production of the later play ; and no other play of Browning was produced on its own merits. Under any conditions, Browning's plays would probably gain little success on the stage ; but they were handicapped by circumstances, and the changed temper of the modern theatre, which when serious is generally non-poetic, still continues the handicap.

We now come to a date more significant in the record of Browning's life than any other not connected with his marriage. Greater than any other factor towards his development except the supreme personal influence of his wife was the supreme national influence of Italy, exercised through her arts, her history, her human types, her natural scenery, her very atmosphere :

“Open my heart and you will see
Graved inside of it, ‘Italy.’
Such lovers old are I and she :
So it always was, so shall ever be !”

In April, 1838, Browning set sail for Trieste as sole passenger in a merchantman ; a rough experience, which he enjoyed (after a fortnight miserably lost in sea-sickness) because it brought him into close and friendly touch with sailors, and thus gave him experience of new types. Very naturally under the circumstances, the best-known literary result of the voyage sprang not from joy in the sea, but from the recovered yet weary traveller's delight in the thought of his favourite exercise on land. Browning has given us several fine riding-poems ; but the actual rush of the gallop rings most clearly in this poem, *How they brought the Good News from*

Ghent to Aix. From Trieste he went to Venice, and later, to Asolo—a first visit even more memorable in view both of his later life and of his poetry. Asolo was soon to furnish the scene of *Pippa Passes*, Venice that of *In a Gondola*; but the immediate purpose of the journey was to work up the setting of *Sordello*.

This study in the soul-history of the obscure Italian poet of the thirteenth century, which had been laid on one side for *Strafford*, appeared in 1840. Probably no piece of sincere and fine artistic work has ever prejudiced its author's chance of popularity so much as this. *Pauline* was chaotic, but could be forgiven as a 'prentice-piece; *Paracelsus* had marked a great advance in lucidity of thought and expression; *Strafford*, whatever criticisms it may merit, cannot be called obscure for reading. But *Sordello* gave pause even to the friendliest critics. It remains a kind of test-piece for the reader of Browning. It is an enchanted forest, alluring yet baffling. It holds innumerable beauties; but to reach them the reader must stumble along darksome paths of difficult expression, and through close-grown and thorny thickets of allusion, and fight very dragons of over-abrupt thought. Of many stories about the poem's reception, two of the best-known may be recalled for their apt caricature of its effect. Carlyle wrote to say that his wife found it very interesting and would like to know whether *Sordello* was a man, a city, or a book. Tennyson declared that he could understand only the first and the last line—"Who will, may hear *Sordello's* story told," and "Who would, has heard *Sordello's* story told,"—and both were lies. From *Sordello* dates the tradition of Browning's obscurity; later work that by its dramatic form demanded some

slight imaginative effort was darkened for the public by the shadow of *Sordello*. Even the admirers of Browning later helped the tradition by the well-meaning but somewhat pedantic conscientiousness of their study, which too often has impressed the hesitating rather by its labour than its rewards. I would advise the reader not to attempt *Sordello* until he has learned to care greatly for Browning's work through easier examples—which means through almost any other example. Then by all means let him return to *Sordello*. The poem magnificently repays the effort of reading; but the reader new to Browning might be frightened away by coming upon it unwarned and over-soon.

* In his dedication, to J. Milsand, of the 1863 edition of *Sordello*, Browning wrote: "The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so. . . ." This attitude, which we have already recognised in the earlier works, grows increasingly clear in the series of poems and dramas published under the serial title *Bells and Pomegranates*. All Browning's poems hitherto had been financially unsuccessful. Edward Moxon, the publisher, was bringing out some cheap reprints of Elizabethan dramatists, and he suggested that Browning's expenses of publication might be greatly reduced by printing his poems in pamphlet form, using the cheap type provided for the reprints. Browning had lying by him *Pippa Passes*, *King Victor and King Charles*, and *The Return of the Druses* (originally named *Mansoor the Hierophant*), and he jumped at the suggestion, which offered them publication and a better chance of circula-

tion. Eight numbers appeared, at prices ranging from sixpence to half-a-crown : (i.) 1841, *Pippa Passes* ; (ii.) 1842, *King Victor and King Charles* ; (iii.) 1842, *Dramatic Lyrics* ; (iv.) 1843, *The Return of the Druses* ; (v.) 1843, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* ; (vi.) 1844, *Colombe's Birthday* ; (vii.) 1845, *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* ; (viii.) 1846, *Luria*, and *A Soul's Tragedy*. By the title *Bells and Pomegranates* he meant "to indicate an endeavour towards something like an alternation, or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought ; which looks too ambitious thus expressed, so the symbol was preferred." Characteristically, the explanation was not offered until the last number, and then at Miss Barrett's request ; for to Browning the meaning of the name seemed quite obvious. "It is little to the purpose that such is actually one of the most familiar of the many Rabbinical (and Patristic) acceptations of the phrase ; because I confess that, letting authority alone, I supposed the bare words, in such juxtaposition, would sufficiently convey the desired meaning."

The work of these six years is exceedingly interesting and significant. Six of the eight volumes contain drama ; not drama suited to the stage (unless *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* be doubtfully excepted), but book-drama—a natural sequence to *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, for an art maturing in technique. As his technical accomplishment increases, he devotes it more and more rigorously to his self-chosen task—to express incidents in the history of the soul. He learned to do this supremely through the short dramatic poem, especially the dramatic monologue. More and more the speeches of the dramas point in this direction (cf. pp. 40, 47);

and *Pippa Passes*, with its four scenes so loosely connected through Pippa, marks the replacement for the first time of progressive study of a soul's history by concentration on one crucial moment. The later dramas spend their whole art in leading up to some such moment. In the *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) he experiments finely in the briefer dramatic poem : *Cristina* and *Porphyria's Lover* mark clearly the path for his genius. In the *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845) he is master of the form. *Pictor Ignotus*, *The Lost Mistress*, *The Bishop orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's*, *The Flight of the Duchess*, the first part of *Saul*—no more need be named to show that by this date Browning had worked out his own characteristic poetic method. Still greater examples were to follow ; but the difference between these poems and the greatest in *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ* is in degree, not in kind, of power and accomplishment.

CHAPTER III

“ PAULINE,” “ PARACELsus,” “ SORDELLO ”

FOR a mind at once sensitive and healthy, introspection is both a symptom of immaturity and a means of growth. It is thus natural that in PAULINE, published anonymously in Browning's twenty-first year, there appears through the mask of fiction more of self-expression and particularly of self-criticism than in any of the later poems. This characteristic, as well as technical defects, may help to explain Browning's too contemptuous attitude towards the poem. He did not include it among his acknowledged work until 1868, and then, he

grumbles, "with extreme repugnance, indeed purely of necessity," to forestall a proposed pirated edition. Yet no student of Browning, however pious towards his wishes, could spare *Pauline*. Apart from its true poetic beauties, among which the admirable passages descriptive of nature must be given first place, the poem is valuable for the study of Browning's development. Interest in psychological problems, monologue form, the doctrines of the spiritual power of love and of revelation gained through apparent failure—all these are characteristics which recur in mature work. Above all the poem is interesting as a monument to Browning's early devotion to Shelley. His hero-worship finds direct expression in three passages—the invocation to the "Suntreader," the description of the idealistic poet whose influence raises the hero again after his baptism in evil, and the concluding invocation. But his discipleship could be recognised without these overt professions. In subject and in ethical temper *Pauline* closely resembles Shelley's *Alastor*. The descriptions of nature, in which the poem is particularly rich, recall Shelley's in power of suggesting spiritual and emotional significances in inanimate things, though Browning's sensitiveness to detail keeps his scenery more real and earthly than Shelley's. Shelley's, too, is the frequent inversion of the ordinary habit of metaphor, so that a concrete thing is illustrated by an abstract. Finally, diction and rhythm frequently show Shelley's influence. When all has been said, however (and some traces of Keats's influence also have to be recognised), the poem remains essentially original and characteristic. It gives us our sole opportunity of seeing Browning in the state of pupilage ; and the spectacle impresses us much as does

that of Shakespeare under the influence of Marlowe. Careful definition of the debt leads only to clearer recognition of the pupil's independent power.

PARACELSIUS (cf. p. 17). *Pauline* may be regarded as Browning's 'prentice-piece, *Paracelsus* as that by which he proves his right of place in the great craft of poets. Again he strives to trace the hidden springs of motive and to reveal the ultimate values of life ; but now the web of his thought is closer in texture and clearer in design, and its colours are at once richer and softer. His technique has developed in like degree ; the music of the verse is deeper and more sustained. More than ever he is concerned to express through his dramatic personages his own attitude towards life : but by giving his main personage interlocutors he gains alike in range of thought, in clearness of expression, and in variety of effect.

The poem does not pretend to be a drama ; it is the history of a soul revealed at four crucial stages, by means of dialogue between Paracelsus and minor characters. The first part, "Paracelsus aspires," shows the young student, like Francis Bacon eighty years later, dedicating his life to knowledge. He believes that his fierce desire for knowledge is earnest of his God-appointed mission ; and he seeks no selfish gain, but to discover new truth for the service of mankind. Yet he feels no love for those whom he would serve, and he despairs all help of other workers, all familiar ways of learning. He is passionately confident of his power, unaided, to fathom all the abysses of knowledge, then, victorious, to fling his limitless booty to be shared by common men. His friend Festus warns him not thus to cut himself off from humanity ; and Michal, Festus's wife, forebodes

that success, in such pride, might mean spiritual failure. But Paracelsus sets forth his faith in the might of the human spirit in an outburst so splendid that his friends are convinced of his power to accomplish his purpose, to prove by his own achievement the true divinity of man's soul.

In Part II "Paracelsus attains"; but first, disillusionment has come. Nine years of unceasing and unsparing labour have passed, years so full of effort that they have left him no time for counting results. At last a trivial circumstance makes him take stock of what he has indeed achieved, excluding all he only hopes to achieve. He finds it a mere nothing—"a few discoveries . . . the fragmentary product of much toil." And for this he has spent nine years, for this he has sacrificed his youth and all the kindly joys of men. Worse still, unnoticed in his toil, his high and assured hopes have slipped away with his youth; little by little weariness has drugged him, and he has lost faith in the integrity even of his own purpose. As he muses in half-distraught bitterness on his wrecked ideals, he hears a voice chanting. It is the poet Aprile who interrupts him, a man still more tormented in spirit than Paracelsus. He has gone mad through despair of fulfilling his aim, to love infinitely and be loved. As Paracelsus has failed, even in knowledge, through impatience to know all, so Aprile has failed in life and art through dreaming so intensely of absolute beauty and infinite love that he has neglected the beauty and love that indeed surrounded him in the world. Both have hoped instantly to capture the infinite, instead of seeking the slow revelation of the infinite in the finite. And each has conceived only one aspect of

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infinite life. Paracelsus has sought only power, through knowledge ; Aprile has sought only beauty, through love ; and each has failed because infinite power and beauty are one, because infinite understanding and love are one. Now revelation comes at last to each. Aprile, dying, forgets his ruin in faith in the success of Paracelsus :

. . . “ Let our God’s praise
Go bravely through the world at last ! What care
Through me or thee ? ” . . .
“ Yes ; I see now. God is the perfect poet
Who in his person acts his own creations.”

Paracelsus sees the folly of his arrogant self-isolation :

“ Love me henceforth, Aprile, while I learn
To love ; and, merciful God, forgive us both ! ”

The third part, “ Paracelsus,” shows Paracelsus at the summit of his material success, at the lowest depths to which his spirit sinks. Five years have passed, and he is now the most applauded professor at Basil. But when Festus, his old friend, expresses joy in his success, Paracelsus declares his essential failure and his misery. The new motive revealed to him through Aprile has not proved strong enough to subdue the imprint which his soul had already received from his aims and experiences. His intellect has absorbed every other faculty ; he cannot love and hope and fear and trust like other men. He struggles to love, to feel beauty, but he cannot. Aprile’s revelation has confirmed his despair of fulfilling his old dreams, but yet he cannot live for anything else. In this second failure he has sunk deeper than in the first : he feels himself beginning to care for vulgar praise ; he is moved by vanity to surpass in their own trickery

the charlatans he once loathed; he suspects himself even of treachery in his own mind to his devotion to truth.

Two years later (Part IV, "Paracelsus aspires") we find him telling Festus, at Colmar, that earthly success crumbled in his hands, and that he has been dismissed from his chair at Basil. He returns now to the old aims—but not by the old means. He will still seek knowledge, but now he will accept every help and every incidental gain, even "the meanest earthliest sensualest delight." He finds in the wine-cup one joy gained, and tries to feel triumph in his contempt for mankind; but the friendship and sincerity of Festus strip away the veil of boisterous cynicism with which he seeks to cover even from himself his deep sense of degradation. He prays Festus to hide his shame from Michal; and then he learns that she is dead—Michal, whose serene and gentle spirit had irradiated his earlier days like some loved familiar star. The news makes him feel how trifling are life's glories and failures; and still more strongly how sure it is that the soul must live after what men call death.

Thirteen years pass before the final scene (Part V, "Paracelsus attains"). Paracelsus lies dying in a hospital cell at Salzburg, and Festus has come to him once more. At first Paracelsus is delirious, and all the hopes and failures of his past life flicker before him. Slowly the presence of Festus dawns upon him and calms him. His friend's unswerving and unquestioning love sets free his spirit from the wild sway of desperate memory and diseased body, and his soul turns calmly and with clear vision to survey its attainment before it passes from this life. He is happy;

he knows that he has fulfilled God's purpose despite all mistakes.

“(I) have lived !
We have to live alone to set forth well
God's praise.”¹

His early self-dedication to man's service was self-dedication to God ; for in all creation God is immanent, and man is at once “the consummation of this scheme of being” and the first manifestation of infinitely higher growth, beyond this life. Paracelsus sees now that he was driven to despair of man's powers by ignorant impatience, because he did not realize the stupendous scale of man's evolution. He understands now that even when he learned, through Aprile, that love must always precede power, he still failed because he had not learned through personal love of mankind to see how slowly, though unfailingly, the divine in mankind struggles into fuller growth. In his death hour, like the dying Aprile, he triumphs in the thought that others shall succeed where he has failed. His egoistic passion to bestow knowledge on humanity has changed to self-forgetting desire for man's enlightenment ; his impatience, to serene trust. Only in the hour of death does he grasp the meaning of life ; but it is by living, by strenuous though often mistaken effort, that unconsciously he has been prepared thus to die. Losing all, he finds the secret of God's purpose in man's life on earth ; dying, his clearer life begins ; failing utterly, Paracelsus at last “attains.”

Browning gave very careful attention to the historical sources bearing on his subject. He aims at a full and true picture ; he records Paracelsus's drunkenness, which has only the slightest bearing on his character

¹ “Alone” of course means “only”; the sense would have been clearer if Browning had written “We have alone to live.”

and philosophy. But he treats as equally accidental the faith in magical short-cuts to the secrets of nature, which almost inevitably tainted the science of the Renascence, so suddenly awakened to a sense of man's power through knowledge, so eager to complete its conquest.) The popular legends of Dr. Faustus, and the doctrine of "forms" of Francis Bacon himself, point the danger to which historically Paracelsus fell a victim. Browning suggests the ardour and limitless energy of the Renascence temper, but not its specific limitations. The historical truth of the portrait, however, is a point of minor importance ; what does matter greatly is its power of carrying conviction. Paracelsus does not grow alive for us as does, for example, Fra Lippo Lippi. Sympathy for one whose elements of greatness have been obscured by his failings led Browning to identify himself with Paracelsus too completely for a dramatic portrait entirely coherent and convincing. To interpret him, he looks into his own soul ; and unconsciously he creates an image which in its finest features reflects himself instead of representing its model. The wonderful final profession of faith of Paracelsus is saturated by the idea of evolution ; it is Browning himself who speaks.

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The poem thus does not suggest the power of objective creation of types alien to his personal experience shown in *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ*. Again, his explanation that he chooses to show moods rather than "the external machinery of incident" proves that his renunciation of one of the chief sources of interest in narrative was deliberate, but leaves us free to think that it was unwise. A poem almost entirely built up of somewhat abstract philosophical dialogue makes very exacting claims on the reader's attention, if

it is never to flag ; and Browning has not yet learned to ease the strain by giving concrete images for abstract ideas. Nevertheless *Paracelsus* remains a marvellous achievement for a man of twenty-three, and a very important document in the history of Browning's development. What is very much more our concern, it is a great poem on its intrinsic merits. The blank verse is full of various music, the thought is energetic and noble, the style is always adequate and often beautiful, the lyrics are singularly haunting. Of the minor personages Festus is something of a type-figure, embodying simple faith, true friendship, and sound sense. He scarcely comes to life, except in telling of Michal's death, and in the two passionate speeches in Part V, beginning "That God shall take thee to his breast" and "I am for noble Aureole, God !" Similarly Aprile, the "Italian poet," remains unreal. Some of his characteristics are undoubtedly suggested by Shelley, though there is no attempt at a portrait. He is little more than a shadowy incarnation of the ideas which Browning wishes to express through his lips. Michal, on the other hand, though her part is very slight, gives promise of Browning's great power of drawing women. Her perfect charm of serene love and purity broods over the scene wherever she is mentioned. Paracelsus in his day of self-contemptuous success finds peace in thinking of her :

" And Michal's face
Still wears that quiet and peculiar light
Like the dim circlet floating round a pearl ! "

SORDELLO was described by Browning as a companion poem to *Paracelsus* ; and though it did not appear till 1840, having been laid aside for *Strafford*, in the history of Browning's poetic development it must certainly be placed next after *Paracelsus*. It is

another study in ‘the development of a soul.’ Sordello has affinities with Paracelsus in his vast dreams, his disillusionment, his ultimate attainment in the hour of death ; like Paracelsus, Sordello craves both to realize his own soul fully in all its powers, and to serve mankind. But it is not, as with Paracelsus, pride or over-impatient ambition or contempt for humanity that brings Sordello’s fate upon him ; it is lack of power of action, lack of power to “fit to the finite his infinity.” There is in him something of Hamlet, and something of Brutus. He is a dreamer in an age of action, an idealist baffled alike by his environment and by his own egoism. From a boyhood of golden dreams he passes to triumph as a poet, only to grow disgusted with the inadequacy of his art to express his infinite conceptions. Flinging aside poetry he seeks to turn his ideas to deeds, in the service of his country. Italy is torn between the Guelf and Ghibellin factions : Sordello sees in the Guelf party the hope of his nation. Then it is revealed that he is the son of Salinguerra, the Ghibellin leader, and that Palma, the Ghibellin princess who has filled his boyish dreams, loves him. Salinguerra offers him rule over Northern Italy ; acceptance means realization of every worldly ambition at the price of his idealistic faith in the Guelf party. He triumphs over the great temptation, but the struggle is too great for his strength. They find him dead, with the badge of his promised power trampled under foot.

I have already spoken of the difficulty of the poem (*cf.* p. 20), and I do not recommend any reader to turn to it for easy pleasure. Browning’s very carefulness of work is here a hindrance ; he soaked himself in the literature of his subject, and constantly baffles the reader by allusions which for most of us need explanatory notes. Like the matter, the style is exacting

through overmuch compression. The poem is, however, strewn with passages of superb and characteristic work ; in particular some of the descriptive passages are among Browning's greatest in this kind. The ethical kernel of the poem is that service of man is service of God, and that the infinite and the finite may be linked by love ; fundamental doctrines of Browning from his earliest work to his latest.¹

CHAPTER IV

"PIPPA PASSES" AND "IN A GONDOLA"

Pippa Passes (cf. pp. 22-3) deserves a brief separate chapter. Browning, in a letter to his future wife in 1845, named it his favourite among his works. It is probably the most widely read of Browning's longer poems ; it illustrates the versatility of his genius more fully than any other single work ; and it is particularly attractive both in thought and expression. In general plan it stands between the elaborate soul-histories of *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, and *Sordello*, and the short dramatic poems with their revelation of soul through a single moment. In form it stands between the mere dialogue of *Paracelsus* and the formal plays ; it is definitely dramatic—the Ottima-Sebald scene marks Browning's highest dramatic achievement—but it is unfettered by consideration of stage requirements.

¹ Adequate comment on *Sordello* in the brief space at my disposal is so entirely impossible that I abandon it with these summary remarks ; referring the reader to the excellent articles on the poem in the books by Professor Herford, Symons, and Dowden, mentioned in the bibliography. I consider the first-named the most illuminating.

Mrs. Sutherland Orr has recorded how the poem originated (*Handbook*, p. 55): "Mr. Browning was walking alone, in a wood near Dulwich, when the image flashed upon him of some one walking thus alone through life; one apparently too obscure to leave a trace of his or her passage, yet exerting a lasting though unconscious influence at every step of it; and the image shaped itself into the little silk-winder of Asolo, Felippa or Pippa."

In *Paracelsus*, Browning expressed his faith that we have merely to live to set forth God's praise. In *Pippa Passes* he develops the thought further; every living thing serves God as well as praises Him; each, in fulfilling its own life, however trivial, plays its part in the infinite scheme. This idea recurs constantly in Browning's work; explicitly again in *The Boy and the Angel*, implicitly in every poem that gives opportunity for the thought; but it is never stated more clearly and beautifully than here.

The poem consists of four scenes, with introduction, links, and conclusion, loosely connected through the person of Pippa. The introduction, in admirably managed rhymed verses of varying length, shows Pippa waking to her one yearly holiday. She thinks of the four happiest people in Asolo—the superb Ottima with her lover, Jules with his bride, Luigi with his mother, Monsignor, the great lord of the Church. Musing that Monsignor the Bishop must be the happiest of all, for God's love is surest, she reflects that she too shares God's love; and as she goes forth to spend her day near these happy ones, she envies none, for the thought of her New Year hymn goes with her:

"All service ranks the same with God :
 If now, as formerly he trod
 Paradise, his presence fills
 Our earth, each only as God wills
 Can work—God's puppets, best and worst
 Are we ; there is no last nor first."

In the morning she passes by the shrub-house on the hill-side, where Ottima and her lover Sebald hide from the daylight. Sebald has murdered his mistress's husband. His conscience has awakened to remorse, but Ottima's magnificent beauty and strength of will are drawing him to share her utter recklessness in sin when Pippa's song calls him back to the world of sweet and pure emotions.

"The year's at the spring
 And day's at the morn ;
 Morning's at seven ;
 The hill-side's dew-pearled ;
 The lark's on the wing ;
 The snail's on the thorn :
 God's in his heaven—
 All's right with the world !"

It strikes on his passion as sunshine on a painted face. Sebald recoils with loathing from his partner in crime ; but his utter self-condemnation awakens Ottima's soul also through its noblest element—her power of love :

"Not me—to him, O God, be merciful!"

No summary or quotation can suggest the power of the scene. The figure of Ottima, daemonicly sensual and non-moral, tremendous in sheer force of passion, ranks with that other "great white Queen, magnificent in sin," Webster's Vittoria. It is excelled, as is every other study in sensual womanhood, by Shakespeare's

Cleopatra in her infinite variety ; but even Cleopatra is not more intense. The racial contrast between Italian Ottima and German Sebald is admirably suggested.

At noon, Pippa passes by the home of the painter Jules and the bride through whom he has been tricked ; in the evening she goes up the hill, where Luigi, the young patriot, struggles against his mother's prayers that he will abandon his dangerous task ; at night she passes by the palace where the Bishop plots evil against her, since unknowing she blocks his way to wealth. Each life is at a turning-point ; her unconscious song saves each from catastrophe. The conclusion shows Pippa at her day's end, wondering whether indeed she could ever in the least degree touch the lives of those she had "fancied being" during the day. And as she turns to sleep she repeats a scrap of her morning hymn :

"All service ranks the same with God. . . ."

The conception of the crucial moment, so clearly illustrated in each of the scenes of *Pippa Passes*, is another motive which recurs constantly throughout Browning's work. But even more than by its general motives, the poem delights by its masterly execution. The grotesque comedy of the art-students and of Bluphocks, the poignant pathos of the "poor girls" who are to decoy Pippa out of Monsignor's way, the irony of Pippa's references to the Bishop's goodness when he is plotting against her, the dramatic force of all the scenes and supremely of the first—any one of these qualities alone would make the poem notable. And to all this dramatic power is added verse of most various beauty ; blank

verse splendidly flexible and strong, the original and delightful irregular metres of Pippa's introduction and conclusion, and lyrics that blend thought and emotion in perfect song.

It is convenient to mention here *In a Gondola*, published in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), but more accurately to be described as lyrical drama. In type it approaches the separate scenes of *Pippa Passes*; but they belong to the world of actuality, while in this poem we seem to drift away from it. The magic hour of the two lovers is removed from common life, as the waters which carry the gondola are mysteriously remote from the shores their ripple touches. It expresses wonderfully the Ecstasy of the hour of love snatched in the midst of peril; a dream more passionate than life. Death ends the dream: "the Three" wait hidden at the landing-place and stab the lover before the eyes of his beloved. "It was ordained to be so . . ." As in *Romeo and Juliet*, the tragic end seems inevitable; there is a glory so bright that we know it cannot last in this world, and its plunge into eclipse pains less than would its dimming to the commonplace. The lyrical passages hold the very magic of the night and the sea and love:

"I send my heart up to thee, all my heart
In this my singing.
For the stars help me, and the sea bears part;
The very night is clinging
Closer to Venice streets to leave one space
Above me, whence thy face
May light my joyous heart to thee its dwelling-place."

CHAPTER V

DRAMAS

ONE of the most striking general characteristics of Browning's work is its dramatic quality ; and it is not surprising that he felt strongly attracted towards the dramatic form. For reasons which we shall note in the course of this chapter, he failed to produce entirely satisfactory drama ; but the practice of the most rigidly economical of the larger literary forms helped to discipline his copious powers and to restrain the first fine but over-careless rapture of his style. Just as Scott's tales in verse are best considered as the preliminary to his novels, so Browning's dramas are best considered as the preliminary to his great dramatic monologues. Their worth in actual achievement is high, very high if we regard them as reading-drama rather than as acting-drama ; but they are overshadowed by the greater work in a different kind, for which they helped to prepare his art.

Since it is impossible in this little book fully to discuss all the plays, it seems best to illustrate their general characteristics from one example, adding only very summary comment on the rest.

Strafford deals with the tragic fate of the soldier and statesman who served Charles I too well, and was sacrificed by him to popular anger. Patriot and idealist, he sees the danger of strife between king and people, and dreams that he can serve both best by strengthening the throne and moving the King to reforms. But his political faith is inextricably confused with personal love of Charles. Circumstances make him stand out as champion of absolute monarchy against

the constitutional party led by Pym. To serve the King he has broken with his Parliamentarian friends, and he resists Pym's final great effort to win him back to the people's cause. He persists in his allegiance, though he sees that the intrigues of other courtiers, the Queen's enmity and Charles's impulsive weakness strike at the root of his usefulness. At last the anger of the Commons demands a victim, and Charles lets Strafford perish as his scapegoat ; but even when the King withholds the word that would prove his innocence, and signs the warrant for his execution, his love is not shaken. The supreme tragedy for him is that his sacrifice is fruitless. He foresees the fate of Charles ; and the pain of his own imminent death is forgotten in the agony of that foreknowledge :

“O God, I shall die first—I shall die first !”

The interest is concentrated on the character of Strafford, which is conceived with fine insight. Browning avoids the pitfall of over-conscientious accuracy in the general historical setting. The central theme finds a telling contrast in Pym's stern sacrifice of his friend to his country's good, and a parallel in the Countess of Carlisle's devotion to him, devotion which he never recognizes. Browning certainly kept in view theatrical effect. Sometimes, as Dowden has pointed out, he even writes for the gallery, as in the scene where Charles's entry makes Strafford drop Pym's hand—a cheap symbol of their broken friendship ; and again where Strafford's children, with their prattle and song, invoke the domestic sympathies of the audience for the doomed father. There are also bustling scenes with a full stage, such as the last scene of Act III ; while effective dramatic moments are plentiful. The verse is written

with due regard to its effect when spoken ; Browning does not make the mistake of overloading it with ornament, the commonest mistake of poets writing drama.

Yet with all these dramatic qualities, the play fails as a whole to produce dramatic effect, and from causes which operate in greater or less degree in all Browning's plays. First, the interest is too exclusively laid on character ; the incidents are not interesting enough. Aristotle, to whom dramatists as well as critics may still profitably go to school, names as the chief material for tragedy the actions of men, and their characters with a view to the actions. The achievement of Elizabethan drama, to look no further, may make us reverse the emphasis ; but even if we say that tragedy should concern itself primarily with character, we must add emphatically "and with episodes revealing character." Character may be described or analysed more effectively in narrative than on the stage. The dramatist's chief advantage over the novelist or narrative poet is that he can actually show actions and events, instead of merely describing them. He sacrifices this advantage if he does not use action and episode, both for their immediate effect and to reveal character.¹

In *Strafford*, as generally in Browning's plays, the action-interest is not great enough ; the dramatic possibilities of the plot, though certainly not ignored, are too often muffled in mere talk. Further, the dialogue tends to describe and analyse the emotions

¹ M. Maeterlinck in his plea for "static drama" is really outlining a new art, suggestive rather than imitative, symbolic rather than imaginatively naturalistic. We may appreciate work of this type, and also the drama of philosophical or political exposition like Mr. Shaw's *Man and Superman* and *John Bull's Other Island*. But we welcome these, as we welcome such avowed reading-drama as Mr. Hardy's *The Dynasts*, as interesting additional types, not as substitutes for or even as rivals of true acting-drama.

which it should directly reveal. The intellectual element intrudes on the emotional ; and the matter is often either too subtle or too closely packed for an audience to grasp it in acted presentation. The verse, as we have said, is moderately good "speaking" verse, but it is not definitely dramatic. Finally, Browning does not give enough consideration to his collaborator the actor. Repeatedly he expresses in words what a good playwright would leave to be played. Similarly he sins by omission. There are not enough opportunities for by-play or change of position. Exaggerated by-play and unmeaning restlessness are abominations, but the opposite extreme also is trying to the audience. In many scenes of *Strafford*, the actors would have to be very resourceful to save the stage effect from monotony.

King Victor and King Charles (Time, 1730-1 ; place, Sardinia). To avoid the dangers created by his oppressions at home and his unscrupulous diplomacy abroad, King Victor of Sardinia forces his crown upon his despised son Charles. Charles reveals unsuspected force of character, and his reforms save the situation. His father then seeks to resume power, and Charles is thus torn between two duties—that to his father and that to his people and to God.

This historical material is full of possibilities, and Browning was pleased with his treatment of it. But expression lags behind conception, and the play lacks life. There is scarcely any dramatic incident before the final scene. Even the psychological description and analysis, at best dubiously in place in drama, is not wholly satisfying. We do not feel the alleged compelling power of Victor's personality ; and the conflict in Charles's mind between his two dominating feelings is disappointingly treated. On the other hand, the

character of the German princess, Polyxena, wife of Charles, is finely conceived ; and only Browning could have produced the brilliant sketch of the intriguing minister D'Ormea, who "serves God at the devil's bidding." The climax is powerful and thoroughly characteristic, but better fitted to be read than acted.

The Return of the Druses (Time, fifteenth century ; place, an island in the Southern Sporades). Here, as already in *Pippa Passes*, Browning abandons history for an imaginary plot, though he retains a setting of historical interest. To free his oppressed countrymen, the hero, Djabal, declares himself their expected Messiah. Through the too great faith of the maiden whom he loves, he is forced to confess the imposture ; but her devotion averts the threatened failure of his scheme, at the price of her life. Djabal waits only to see the liberation of his people assured, then follows her into death.

The fifth act is very powerful and moving, despite too many long speeches ; and in the earlier acts, too, there are fine moments. Djabal, in whom Eastern blood and Western training clash, is a true tragic figure, great and yet foredoomed by an inner discord. His character is thrown into stronger relief by contrast with the best and worst of the West, in his friend Loys de Breux and the Prefect, and with the uncorrupted East, fine in Khalil, finest in the maiden Anael, a very flame of self-forgetting patriotism and religion and love. As a study in racial psychology Djabal anticipates Luria ; as an example of the deceiver who cannot wholly be condemned, of the impostor who believes himself justified in his imposture, he stands first (for Paracelsus keeps his true beliefs separate from his charlatanry) in the wonderful series of characters which in-

cludes Bishop Blougram and Mr. Sludge ; first, and the most attractive, though certainly not the most brilliant.

A Blot in the 'Scutcheon (Time, eighteenth century ; place, England) was written in five days, and the rapid work made for simplicity and freshness. In this play Browning turns from the somewhat far-sought material of the two plays just discussed to a subject closer to contemporary sympathy by its setting, and still more by its direct appeal to simple and enduring emotions. Henry Mertoun and Mildred Tresham have become lovers in secret, and in deed are guilty though in thought most innocent. Shame drives them to simple deception, again harmless in purpose. When they meet before Mildred's brother, they pretend to be strangers. Mertoun begs Mildred's hand from Lord Tresham, whom he honours and loves. Tresham agrees ; but chance reveals that Mildred has had a lover. Tresham watches by night outside her chamber window ; and when Mertoun comes once more to meet her before their marriage, Tresham challenges him. Mertoun does not try to guard himself, and falls. The news breaks Mildred's heart, and Tresham, now knowing all, cannot bear to live longer.

The play suffers greatly from the old fault of too many long speeches, and the diction is sometimes stilted. The construction, too, is unsatisfactory. Too much is made to depend on Mildred's conduct on discovery—which is not wholly convincing—and on Mertoun's final visit to Mildred. But criticism is lost in admiration for the supreme pathos of the play. It is Browning's *Romeo and Juliet*. Every mistake made by the lovers is due to their utter inexperience of life. "If youth could know," there would have been no

tragedy. "How young he is!" exclaims Tresham when Mertoun lies dying at his feet. And Mildred cries :

"I—I was so young!
Beside, I loved him, Thorold—and I had
No mother; God forgot me; so, I fell."

Here is the same tragedy of helpless ruined youth that makes Mr. Hardy's Tess an unforgettable and most piteous figure. In Mildred are foreshadowed the child-like simplicity, intensity of love, and dumb acceptance of suffering that later make Pompilia one of the most moving figures in the world's literature.

Colombe's Birthday (Time, seventeenth century; place, Juliers, the residence of the Duchess of Cleves).

Colombe has reigned as Duchess for one year; the action of the play occupies the anniversary of her coronation, which is also her birthday. A rival with better claims to the duchy has appeared: Berthold, a German prince, whose growing power marks him as the future Emperor. Valence, a poor advocate of Cleves who has come to court to urge redress of his city's grievances, remains true to Colombe when others hail the new power, and threatens Berthold with the people's resistance. When called upon to judge the evidence, however, he is forced to admit Berthold's claim as the stronger. Berthold suggests marriage as a solution of the difficulty, but does not pretend to love Colombe. Valence lays the alternatives before her; loveless marriage with power, or his own love, with obscurity. Made wise by the day's experience, Colombe chooses love.

More definitely than ever the interest is merely psychological, but the characters are so finely drawn and the situation kept so compact that as reading-drama the play is very effective. Colombe herself, ambitious but clear-sighted, a great-hearted woman with

a girl's gaiety, is Shakespearean in conception, a companion for Portia. Valence remains shadowy ; but Berthold, who can see the value of the emotional half of life which his self-contained ambition cannot share, Guibert, the pleasant old worldling, cynical of speech but romantic at heart, the student Melchior—these all live for us.

A Soul's Tragedy (Time, sixteenth century ; place, Faenza). In this brilliant piece of work Browning completely abandons conventional dramatic technique. It falls into two acts, the first written in verse, "Being what was called the poetry of Chiappino's life," the second, "Its prose," in the appropriate medium. There are only four named characters. Chiappino is a person in whom good elements are obscured by egoism. When his friend Luitolfo slays the tyrannical Provost, Chiappino hurries him away in disguise, and putting on Luitolfo's blood-stained clothes, prepares to suffer in his place. But instead of avenging guards, the people rush in, quickened to revolt now their tyrant is slain ; and they hail Chiappino as their liberator. He does not instantly undeceive them ; and, the moment past, he is bound by his own passive lie. The second act shows how Ogniben, the papal legate, plays upon Chiappino's egoism, and leads him on to abandon for his own glorification his revolutionary ideas, his love, and at last even his friend. With such a leader the popular movement falters ; and when Luitolfo, thinking he is serving his friend, publicly confesses his deed, Chiappino's exposure ends the revolt. Luitolfo's punishment is merely nominal, for his action has been politically convenient. External deed and consequence are overshadowed by Chiappino's moment of self-sacrifice and the tragi-comedy of his later spiritual degradation.

The situation is original and interesting, and it is admirably handled ; the result is not drama but a very fascinating essay in an unclassified hybrid form. Chiappino belongs to the group of "mixed" characters, but while Browning's usual climax is the revelation of good in seeming evil, here it is the meaner elements that are fostered by circumstances. Luitolfo and Eulalia are undistinguished examples of two common Browning types—the simple, honest man and the clear-sighted and loving woman. The most original and striking of the characters is Ogniben, cynic, humourist, and Machiavellian diplomatist, who has already "seen three-and-twenty leaders of revolt" and adds the four-and-twentieth with the discriminating pleasure of a connoisseur. He is surely a sixteenth-century relative of Bishop Blougram.

Luria (Time, fifteenth century; place, between Florence and Pisa). The hero, a Moorish soldier, is a companion study to Djabal ; another Eastern soul touched fatally by Western influences. As general of the Florentine army against Pisa, he saves his adopted city ; but the ungrateful Republic mistrusts him as she does all her true servants, and sets spies on him. Even while he wins her victories, he is being tried secretly for treachery. He learns this, and revenge stands waiting for him ; he has only to go over to the Pisans for Florence to fall. But Luria has idealized Florence as the nurse of culture and civilization, and he cannot strike against her. He chooses rather to die ; and in his hour of death finds that his perfect fidelity has gained the trust even of the agent set to spy on him.

Browning excels in subtle psychological studies, and *Luria* is very finely drawn. The East and the West which mingle fatally in his character are well illustrated

by his lieutenant, the pure Moor Husain, and the Italian Braccio, a just man soaked in suspicion by his political experience. The minor characters are all finely drawn—Domizia, the Florentine lady who tries to make Luria the tool of her vengeance for her brother's judicial murder by the Republic ; Puccio, the simple, honest soldier, who wishes to hate the Moor who supplants him as general, yet cannot help admiring him ; Tiburzio, the chivalrous leader of the Pisan troops. It is a noble piece of work, but rather a complex of dramatic character-studies than a drama.

"The wheel has come full circle." Browning's analytical tendency had always strained the form of drama. In *A Soul's Tragedy* and *Luria*, the traditional qualities of drama are almost ignored. The long self-revealing speeches of these plays find their natural successors in the dramatic monologues. When later Browning wished to build again on the larger scale, he combined monologues (in *The Ring and the Book*), or returned to direct narrative. After 1846, he used the dramatic form only once again ; and then with no more thought of stage requirements than in *Pippa Passes*.

The single dramatic scene *In a Balcony* (1853), published in *Men and Women* (1855), has indeed its closest formal analogues in the scenes of that earlier masterpiece. Three characters are revealed in their crucial hour. Norbert and Constance wish to gain their Queen's approval of their love. Constance, over-subtle, urges that the best means is to flatter the Queen ; Norbert must pretend respectful adoration, and beg the hand of the Queen's lady-in-waiting as a devout lover begs the glove made precious by its mistress's touch. She thinks that the Queen's age and rank make the compliment quite safe. But the Queen has been

starved of love through all her life, and her great and simple nature accepts with answering love the gift which she believes is hers. Constance tries to sacrifice herself, forgetting the wrong she does thereby to her lover and to the Queen ; but his faith in her cannot be baffled, and he proclaims the truth. The Queen leaves the lovers, and soon the measured tread of the approaching guard warns them to their last kiss.

All three characters are well drawn. Norbert is a more fully studied Luitolfo, strong and simple. He contrasts finely with Constance. Her motives are all good, but her character needs the full revelation of Norbert's love to raise it to its own level. Until she learns from him, she can weigh other gain against love—not for herself but for him. She has known him hers, but she has never been wholly his ; her nature, more complex and less passionate, has never been stirred to the depths until the moment of tragic stress. Still more dramatic and far more moving is the figure of the Queen. Her nature is as simple and strong as Norbert's. Through years her cheated womanhood has been hungry for love, and has been fed with formal reverence, and has cloaked its suffering even from itself in pride. At last, when Norbert speaks, real life seems to open before her—to be loved for her own sake, to give all that her nature has to give, to be herself truly and fully. Her most secret and sacred feelings are tricked into confession, only to find themselves betrayed. It is inevitable that the insulted queen should avenge the outraged woman. Our deepest pity is not for the lovers, united in death, but for the Queen, doomed to live lonely and to remember.

CHAPTER VI

LOVE AND MARRIED LIFE (1845-1861)

THE small but distinguished audience which Browning's poetry had gained included Miss Elizabeth Barrett, herself a distinguished and popular poetess. Her cousin, John Kenyon, had been at school with Browning's father. He met Browning in 1839, and the difference in age did not prevent them from becoming warm friends. Kenyon talked of each poet to the other ; and on Browning's return from Italy, a trifle gave the occasion for direct communication between them. In *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*, Miss Barrett had represented Bertram, the lover-poet, as reading to Lady Geraldine poems of Spenser, or Wordsworth, or Tennyson :

"Or from Browning some 'Pomegranate,' which, if cut deep
down the middle,
Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity!"

Browning valued the discriminating compliment ; and Kenyon encouraged him to write to Miss Barrett, not merely to thank her but to express the great admiration he felt for her work—"for my cousin is a great invalid and sees no one, but great souls jump at sympathy." On June 10, 1845, Browning wrote the first letter in one of the most wonderful of correspondences. A personal meeting was postponed until the spring, for Miss Barrett was a confirmed invalid and suffered particularly from the English winter. But they truly knew each other before they met. They could not help writing intimately, though they wrote chiefly of literary matters ; each cared so greatly for poetry that

an honest expression of literary opinion was a confession of personality. Almost against Miss Barrett's will, Browning at last visited her, in May. A few weeks later he asked her to marry him. He believed, as she did, that she was a confirmed invalid ; he was thirty-three, she thirty-nine. Because she loved him, she refused to marry him ; but she could not deny her love and at last even began to hope that she might grow strong enough some day to be his wife. " Henceforward," she wrote on September 24th, " I am yours in everything but to do you harm. . . . A promise goes to you that none, except God and your will, shall interpose between you and me—I mean, that if I should free me within a moderate time from the trailing chain of this weakness, I will then be to you whatever at that hour you shall choose—whether friend or more than friend—a friend to the last in any case. So rests with God and with you—only in the meanwhile you are most absolutely free—‘ unentangled ’ (as they call it) by the breadth of a thread ; and if I did not know that you considered yourself so, I would not see you any more, let the effort cost me what it might."

This letter shows that she had determined to set aside the second obstacle to her marriage—her father's extraordinary attitude on the subject. He was a man not intentionally unkind, but criminally egoistic and monomaniac for paternal authority. He considered it an insult that any of his children should desire to marry and leave him. He had crowned his fanatical tyranny when Elizabeth was ordered by her doctor, in the summer of 1845, to leave England for Italy before winter. Her health was in grave danger ; she had private means from an inheritance, and a brother and a sister were free to accompany her. Without offering any reason,

Mr. Barrett set the full weight of his authority against the journey. Then at last she yielded to Browning's insistence that love gave him the right to serve her. The master was fortunately mild; and Browning had given new desire for life, and something of his own hopefulness. "I have been drawn back into life by your means for you,"¹ she writes to him. Through the following summer she gained strength. The marriage took place secretly on September 12, 1846, and a week later Robert Browning and his wife left for France, and thence for Italy.

This is the central event of Browning's career, alike as man and as poet. A man with many friends, he was singularly inaccessible to personal influences. His wife alone made any deep and abiding impression on his personality. As critic and literary influence, too, she was incomparably the most important factor in Browning's development. In his first letter, before seeing her, he had written, "You do, what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only now seem likely to do for the first time. You speak out, *you*—I only see men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light even as it is in me, *but I am going to try*." Similarly in those early days she urged him to express *himself*—not to sink his own personality always in that of dramatic persons: "do not think, with all that music in you, only your dramatic personality should be dumb." The dramatic element, it is true, remained his natural and characteristic

¹ Cf. the first of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Those wonderful poems, in which her love and her self-abnegation found perfect expression, were written at this time, though not shown to Browning until after their marriage. It is characteristic that Browning wrote no corresponding poems. He very seldom used his art for definitely personal speech.

form of expression ; but under her influence he let his own ideals and convictions appear more distinctly, in *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, in *The Statue and the Bust*, in the triumphant conclusion of the earlier fragment of *Saul*, and in the great love-poems of *Men and Women*—*Evelyn Hope*, *The Last Ride Together*, the semi-personal *By the Fireside*, the frankly and gloriously personal *One Word More*. And not only did Browning allow his own personality freer and more subjective expression in the poems written during his married life ; his personality grew, his outlook on life became wider and deeper ; his whole nature expanded, developing above all the emotional elements of imagination which in his earlier work were generally subordinated to the intellectual.¹

The fifteen years of Browning's married life—years spent in Italy, so that a second great stimulating influence was added to that of his wife—were the most important of his life in the growth of his mind and art. In personal outward circumstance they are serene, orderly, full, not at all exciting. Browning is the best citizen among the poets, and the most eminently sane and well-balanced man. To gain his wife he had been forced to break the orthodox rule, and marry her against her father's will ; undertaking a doubly grave responsibility, for Miss Barrett was indeed seriously

¹ His sense of the inspiration he drew from his love, as well as that love itself, found fitting record seven years after his wife's death in the dedication of his greatest work. He inscribed *The Ring and the Book* not to his wife's memory but to her ever living spirit—

“ O lyric love, half angel and half bird
And all a wonder and a wild desire ”

—acknowledging all his poetry “ my due to God Who best taught song by gift of thee.”

ill, and the adventure might well have ended far less happily. Yet his conscience, as healthy as it was sensitive, never doubted for a moment that under the circumstances his action was right. On the other hand, we are told that in the week between the wedding and the departure for Italy, Browning did not call, because he would not act the lie of inquiring for "Miss Barrett" when she was Mrs. Browning. The two circumstances admirably illustrate his character. He was almost amusingly scrupulous in every detail of the conduct of life; though when the occasion called for independent judgment of what was right, no man could have met the test more triumphantly.

The Brownings travelled unhurriedly across France, and after a rest at Genoa, settled at Pisa for the winter. In April they moved to Florence, and after four months in rooms settled down in the Palazzo Guidi. There, on March 9, 1849, was born their son, Robert Wiedemann ("Pen"); but the joy of that event was eclipsed for Browning by the news of his mother's sudden death. "He has loved his mother as such passionate natures only can love," wrote his wife, "and I never saw a man so bowed down in an extremity of sorrow. England looks terrible now. . . ." An intended visit to England was accordingly postponed, and they remained in Florence, with summer visits to the Baths of Lucca, and to Siena, until the summer of 1851. In July of that year they arrived in London for a two months' visit, the first since their marriage. Their pleasure was troubled by Mr. Barrett's refusal to see his daughter or grandson. He never changed his cruel and absurd attitude. The following winter they spent in Paris. There they met George Sand, whom both admired, though her court of artists and pseudo-artists offended

Browning in particular. More important, they made the acquaintance of Joseph Milsand, a critic of great distinction and a man most tender, loyal, and simple, who became one of Browning's closest friends.

After a second summer in London (1852) they returned to Florence. Later journeys need not be chronicled here; indeed a very brief record of the Brownings' doings may suffice; for their life, though full of intellectual and spiritual adventures, offers little that is noteworthy in external events.

They lived chiefly in Florence and Rome. Gradually, and especially during their winters in Rome, their self-chosen solitude gave way before the kindly attacks of old friends visiting Italy, and new friends in the English and American colonies. Among these we hear of Mrs. Sartoris and Fanny Kemble, Thackeray, Lytton, Leighton, Manning (later Cardinal), and Val Prinsep. In one case it was definitely Browning who made the advances. He wrote to Leighton from Siena in October 1859, "No less a lion than dear old Landor is in a house a few steps off. I take care of him—his amiable family having clawed him a little too sharply: so strangely do things come about!" Landor's irascibility made him notoriously difficult to befriend, but Browning handled the "poor old lion" with disarming affection and tenderness. Of the new friendships the closest and most interesting is perhaps that with William Story, the American sculptor. From him Browning took lessons in modelling, and thus worked off the desire to create, which for the time would not grow naturally into verse expression. "As to the modelling," we read in a letter from Mrs. Browning to Miss Browning, "well, I told you that I grudged a little the time from his own particular art.

But it does not do to dishearten him about his modelling. He has given a great deal of time to anatomy with reference to the expression of form, and the clay is only the new medium which has taken the place of drawing. Also Robert is peculiar in his ways as a poet. I have struggled a little with him on this point, for I don't think him right ; that is to say, it would not be right for me. . . . But Robert waits for an inclination, works by fits and starts ; he can't do otherwise, he says, and his head is full of ideas which are to come out in clay or marble."

In the same letter Mrs. Browning writes, "He has material for a volume, and will work at it this summer, he says." This must refer to some part of the *Dramatis Personae*, not in the event published until 1864. Browning's actual output during his married life consists in the very fine double poem *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, published in 1850 ; the essay on Shelley, published in 1852, as introduction to twenty-five letters supposed—wrongly, as appeared later—to be Shelley's ; and the two volumes of *Men and Women*, published in 1855. But if the work published during these years is not great in amount, it is supremely important. *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* discusses the problem of Christian belief more fully and directly than any other poem of Browning's ; the essay on Shelley sets forth his views on some fundamental questions of poetic art in connection with a poet whom he loved greatly ; and *Men and Women* offers us fifty poems, wonderfully various in subject and mood, wonderfully sustained in dramatic intensity, crowned by the one poem in which he ever spoke out as fully as he could his own most intimate personal feeling, the perfect song of the married lover, *One Word More*.

Mrs. Browning's health had at first improved steadily ; then it remained for a time without change ; at last, from 1859 or a little earlier, it began definitely to grow feebler again. The death of her sister, Mrs. Surtees Cook, in 1860, depressed her greatly ; the bronchial trouble to which she was subject returned, and the doctors found her lungs gravely affected. Finally, the death of Cavour gave her the severest shock and sorrow. "I can scarcely command voice or hand to name *Cavour*. That great soul which meditated and made Italy has gone to the diviner Country. If tears or blood could have saved him to us, he should have had mine." She died at Casa Guidi on June 29, 1861.

CHAPTER VII

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE SHORTER POEMS¹

I. *Interest in individual character ; the dramatic monologue form*

In the poetry dominating the English mind when Browning began to write—the poetry of the great Romantic revival—three great tendencies may be distinguished. Wordsworth, and in a different kind Keats, had revealed the beauty and wonder of nature ; Scott had recalled the romantic and human interest of the past ; Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley, in very various ways, had awakened new interest in man, and in the problems of man's existence. None of these tendencies is foreign to Browning, but it is the third which is predominantly his concern ; and all are subdued to the strong pre-

¹ Note the recommendation on p. 12.

dispositions of his mind. Browning loved nature ; he observed natural objects with remarkable accuracy and recorded his observations most vividly.¹ But he never wrote verse merely descriptive of nature. Always some human interest emerges. In *The Englishman in Italy*, for example, there is a wonderful description of Scirocco. The detail is observed most minutely and expressed most powerfully ; our nerves grow tense before the storm ; our lungs seem to labour in the languid, heavy air. But it all ends in five lines of application to a human problem : would not every sane man wish the oppressive influence of the storm to pass ?—and yet in England there are those who question whether it is good to remove the oppression of the Corn Laws, something infinitely worse even than Scirocco. Or if nature is described without regard to explicit moral analogy, at least human emotion is concerned. *Home Thoughts from Abroad* is an exquisite song of the beauty of spring in England. The description of the thrush is one of the most intimate and haunting of all bird-pictures ; everyone who knows the lines must feel a new understanding, affectionate and half-amused, of

¹ Few critics have done justice to the originality and power of the passages descriptive of nature with which Browning's work is strewn. The most suggestive treatment known to me is Professor Herford's (*Browning*, pp. 91–6, 237–260). The serious student of Browning will find the careful study of his metaphors and similes fruitful both in instruction and delight. Here, very regrettably, I must restrict myself to indicating his combination of the power of vivid minute description with that of summary suggestion of the general spirit of a scene. In *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, these powers, repeatedly illustrated elsewhere in more familiar types of landscape, are spent on a "starved French landscape" horrible in its squalid desolation ; the setting commands a realistic effect of the sordid east-European scenes of Crab's thought. weird horror of the forsaken gaol in all Bley's *Sensit* society, by

the thrush's song. But the central emotion of the lyric is not the mere joy of nature, but the longing for his own country felt by an Englishman who watches an alien spring.

In like manner the past appealed to Browning by its human interest, above all by its psychological problems. He loved history because it extended the experience of the present. There he found the soul faced by problems essentially the same as ours, but differently conditioned ; and he delighted to observe the reactions of spirit to environment. In history it is always the individual that attracts him, not the organic relation of events. The general political situation in *Strafford*, for example, is entirely—and, of course, rightly—subordinated to, the masterly study of Strafford's character ; and so with *King Victor and King Charles*, and the other dramas. Still more distinctly this appears in the dramatic monologues. Consider first an extreme example—the *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*. The speaker is a monk, ignorant, superstitious, utterly wedded of the truth of his dogma, and horrified by the thought of heresy ; yet untouched by the spirit of h. full of hate and jealousy, disturbed by the hah cloister longings of the flesh. Among the brethren in the cloister is a placid monk who loves gardenia. tranquillity so irritates the speaker that he g. hate him and wishes to ruin him eternally. Id Scott have written of such a situation ? Si. not have had romance worked out in action, abundance of lively incident, a mad incantation. e the wicked monk bargains Brown Satan, and do. with "brown Dolores" as his coro. of a love story. stead of this Browning no incident, recomn. entional romance, but a

picture of the man's soul in its strange savage twilight. Similarly in his great gallery of mediæval and Renascence studies, Browning does not select incidents but characters; When he deals with incident, as in the dramas, it is always with a view to the revelation of character ; and in the non-dramatic poems (v.s. *Paracelsus*, *Sordello*) the subordination of incident to character is still more marked. It is not that he lacks the power to tell a story of action ; he shows that power in *How they brought the Good News*, *Hervé Riel*, *Iván Ivánovitch*, the inimitable *Pied Piper of Hamelin*. But his supreme interest is in the soul of man, and he therefore selects either some crucial moment just before or just after action, when the soul under stress reveals its depths (cf. Chapters IV, V), or some tranquil moment when character displays itself at its ease, in its normal aspects. The Bishop, ordering his tomb at St. Praxed's, displays his materialism, his unending jealousy, all his worldliness ; the innermost meaning of the life of a Renascence scholar emerges from the mourning tribute of the disciples who bear the dead Grammarian to his grave ; an Italian duke of the Renascence lives in all his love of art, his pride, his cruelty so unhesitating and remorseless that it seems non-human rather than simply criminal, in the single short speech named *My Last Duchess*. Examples need not be multiplied ; these may suffice to show that Browning's historical studies, like his descriptions of nature, are dominated by interest in the soul of man.

In the third great group of earlier nineteenth-century poetry, the poetry of man, in the work of Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley, we find as dominant problem the relation of man to other men. The influence of the French Revolution determines the direction of their thought. They were interested above all by man in society, by

the problems of the limits of man's duty to the state, and of the best type of social and political organization for the highest development of man ; and the preoccupation colours work not explicitly concerned with these problems. Browning, on the other hand, is interested above all in man as an individual. He displays small feeling for organic quality, be it in nature, or in the story of man's past, or in the forces that bind men together in organized societies. Not that he is blind to the relationships linking individual things. He recognizes with Wordsworth that Nature and man may act and react one on the other ; he recognizes with Shelley (or by anticipation with Swinburne and Mr. Galsworthy), that no man's life can be isolated from that of his fellows. But these general connections interest him little. When he deals with human relationships it is with the influence of individual on individual ; and generally it is an involuntary influence at that ; the song of Pippa working potently on people of whom she knows nothing, the white flame of Pom-pilia's purity and trust firing Caponsacchi to new nobility (*v.i.* Chapter X), the very being of Evelyn Hope giving motive and direction to the life of the man whose love she never knew.

Instinctively Browning projected his own nature into universal existence. In his overpowering sense of the individuality of the soul we have the explanation of the chief characteristics of his thought. His overflowing vitality forced him to live with gusto ; he enjoyed living, he believed in living, he was fascinated by the simple miracle of existence. He wanted to know all about everybody—or rather, about every soul. Landor credited him with more zest for life than any man since Chaucer :

"Since Chaucer was alive and hale,
 No man hath walked along our roads with step
 So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
 So varied in discourse."

His temperament and his theory naturally point in the same direction. A person so tingling with health and vigour of body and mind and spirit could not conceivably believe that the present life was unimportant or evil, could not deny his most intimate knowledge that life is very real and very good ; nor could he share the newer asceticism which is content to regard the individual as a moment's apparent form of the universal, and which contemplates indifferently the submersion of the individual in the world-soul. Given the sense of his own quite unmistakable individual existence, all other existences also became unique. Every soul had its own history, unlike any other. And Browning set himself to reconstruct these histories, not to create new experience, but to recapture and reveal old experience.¹ Hence the objectivity of so much of his poetry. In the work done before his marriage especially, we seldom find Browning himself speaking. His method is to reveal, not to describe ; to lend the breath of his spirit to some dramatically imagined character so that it lives before us. Amazingly various are the persons on whom this art is exercised—the monk of the Spanish cloister, and Sludge the modern medium, Johannes Agricola and Paracelsus, Caliban and Bishop Blougram, Pippa and the girl of *The Laboratory*, Andrea del Sarto and Fra Lippo Lippi, Rabbi ben Ezra and the modern Don Juan. Conventional labels of good and evil mean nothing in

¹ Cf. *The Ring and the Book*, I. 707 ff., for a very fine statement of this view of the function of Art.

Browning's world ; who shall judge ? All life has worth. The dying Paracelsus proclaims that simply to live is to set forth God's praise ; Rabbi ben Ezra points to the service of body to soul as well as of soul to body ; and Fra Lippo Lippi, that fascinating black-guard of genius, declares :

"This world's no blot for us,
Nor blank ; it means intensely, and means good :
To find its meaning is my meat and drink."

In this faith, Lippi paints things as he sees them :

"Why not . . . paint these
Just as they are, careless what comes of it ?
God's works—paint any one, and count it crime
To let a truth slip."

Browning follows the same method. Of course he cannot lose his personality, but he merges it wonderfully in that of his creation. Turn for example to *Porphyria's Lover*. Browning never intrudes with comment or explanation : we simply see the soul driven by love and unfulfilled hope over the border that limits sanity ; accepting as inevitable what comes to be done, and waiting wondering to hear what God will say. It is in poems of this dramatic type that Browning's genius finds its best expression. In formal narrative poetry on a larger scale, he tends to analyse character too minutely, to offer too great a wealth of material without lucid arrangement, sometimes frankly to be prolix. *Sordello*, and *The Inn Album*, and *Red Cotton Nightcap Country*, for example, scarcely compel the attention, though they fully reward the effort of attention. Browning needed the restraint of a stricter form : his exuberant power of intellect, with such

wealth of learning and
springing instantly on ever,
reader when it pours itself .
dramatic form supplies the nee
Browning's formal dramas fail of ful e"
seen, through his indifference to ex
The short dramatic poem provides resti
the need for organized action. And in s.
Browning shows not only an extraordinary
imagining psychological processes, but an equa.
of dramatic expression. The moment's mood c,
and fixed in the poem suggests all that has led up to
these brief poems are whole dramas in little, dramat
climaxes.) In *The Lost Mistress* speaks the lover who
has just learned that the woman he loves can be no
more to him than a "mere friend." There is no ex-
plicit story ; no appeal for sympathy, no approach to
heroics or to emphasized pathos. But in the little
poem of sixteen lines we are made to conceive the past
of tremulous, patient hope, the future of gray endurance
stabbed by rosy lights of momentary joy that never
can portend true dawn. As an expression of the
moment's mood it is wonderful ; we share the lover's
stunned recognition of his broken hope, the alertness
of the senses to minute trifles which accompanies strong
emotion, the effort to talk ordinarily, the wistfulness of
love that is hopeless but cannot die. But even more
wonderful is the light thrown by the poem beyond the
moment it expresses. The same power of suggestion
characterises *Too Late*, *Cristina*, *Andrea del Sarto*,
Time's Revenges, *A Woman's Last Word*, *Before an
After*.

CHAPTER VIII

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO THE SHORTER POEMSII. *Demand for energy of character. Love-poetry.*
Philosophy

We have spoken of Browning's very strong sense of the worth of the individual soul. That worth lies precisely in its individuality ; and therefore Browning's first ethical demand is that the soul shall be truly itself, shall not be merely what circumstances make of it, but shall strive to fulfil itself. This idea recalls Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* ; and for Browning as for Ibsen self-fulfilment meant, not aimless drifting on every impulse, but something positive and purposeful. Browning loves to paint two types : the character which through over-caution or selfishness or sheer paralysis of will cannot act, and the character which, having some ideal, good or bad, strives towards it, forgetting all else. The same antithesis is familiar in Shakespeare ; a Richard II is contrasted with a Bolingbroke, a Hamlet with a Fortinbras. Sordello is Browning's most elaborate study in the Hamlet-type ; a fine variant, where clash of motives perplexes action, is offered by Djabal in *The Return of the Druses*. The type recurs often in the shorter poems. In *Youth and Art*, the young artist and the young singer are too prudent to risk their ambitions by venturing to love ; and they gain the god they preferred, only to find it dust and ashes. The motive is stated even more explicitly in *The Statue and the Bust*. The poem tells of a duke in Florence, who loved and was loved by the bride of one of his valiers. They intended to join their lives, but for policy's sake they delayed from day to day, from week

to week, from year to year, until they found themselves old and their purpose still unfulfilled. They wasted life ; they let their chance of joy and of growth in soul drift past them. In an epilogue thoroughly characteristic alike of his thought and of his unconventional poetic method, sometimes over-compressed and harsh but unfailingly energetic, Browning points the moral. He anticipates the comment "Delay was best, for their end was a crime," and brushes it aside. Since every human achievement is trivial, the distinction between good and bad merely in deed is insignificant ; it is the effort that counts.¹ These lovers did not refrain because they struggled against their desire and overcame it, but because they were not strong enough of purpose to fulfil it. To the "crime" of their intention they added the far greater sin of spiritual feebleness.

On the other hand, Browning can find some defence for the vigorous knave or fool. Sluggishness, indifference, sloth of living are worse faults for him than the worldliness of Blougram, the self-indulgence of Don Juan (in *Fifine*), the frank rascality of Bluphocks. The overwhelming intellectual ambition of Paracelsus gives him a mistaken purpose in life ; but he sacrifices himself to that purpose, and his life is therefore not wholly wasted. And for the man who strives for a noble end, there is no failure. The very effort is fulfilment, is triumph. In one of his finest poems, *A Grammarians Funeral*, Browning has shown the

¹ "Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped ;
All, I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped."

(*Rabbi ben Ezra.*)

scholar's life in this light—a life of strenuous effort for knowledge, careless of obvious rewards, magnificent because of the completeness of its self-dedication.

The upleap of the will to effort is the means of exaltation of the finite towards the infinite which lies open to all. But life offers also a second means. Effort may complete the individual within the bounds of his personality; but even then he remains incomplete if he is isolated. Browning defends the limits of self as barriers against disturbing forces, barriers behind which the soul fulfils its appointed task of self-development; but these defensive barriers become prison-walls confining the soul unless it can sometimes pass beyond them. The soul's way into wider life Browning found in love. By love, and only by love the personality remains independent, and yet not isolated, mingles perfectly with another personality, giving and gaining, and yet never loses its integral quality. Love is thus the most important of human experiences in Browning's philosophy. This statement must not, however, be taken to suggest that Browning formed a philosophical conception of love, and then tried to write about it, and to realize it in experience. Rather he felt instinctively, temperamentally, in surveying life even before love came within his personal experience, that the most powerful and the most ennobling influence in human life is love.

“For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear,—believe the aged friend—
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
Such prize despite the envy of the world,
And having gained truth: that is all.”
(A Death in the Desert.)

Browning's love poetry is thus particularly important for his philosophy of life, and at the same time remains love poetry, not philosophical poetry about love. Its subjects are as various as love itself ; dæmonic passion in spite of reason, in *Time's Revenge* ; love turned to hate by jealousy, in *The Laboratory* ; half-playful emotion in *Another Way of Love* ; splendid worship in *The Last Ride Together* ; the connoisseurship of Don Juan and the pale, wistful, intense, wifely affection of Donna Elvira ; the fierce sensual passion of Ottima, and the perfect white flame of Pompilia and Caponsacchi. There is scarcely any repetition. In variety and power Browning is the greatest English love-poet.

Despite this variety two generalizations are possible. It is the love of man and woman that gives Browning his material. Love for children, for friends, maternal or brotherly or filial love—these are touched, but merely touched. And secondly, just as Browning feels that effort is in itself a triumph, so he feels that love is in itself a fulfilment. The pathos or tragedy of love unrequited is not a common motive in his work, though it occurs more frequently in the poems written after his wife's death. It carries for Browning some sense of weakness ; of failure in the qualities of soul which love should command and direct. The characteristic note is that of love triumphant over fate. The only real tragedy of love is when it flags and falters through lack of courage and faith. Every other catastrophe is only apparent. Love may fail to find its return ; but the unloved lover in *The Last Ride Together*, or in *Cristina*, has gained the very secret of life, God's own secret. Even death cannot dim the certainty of love's fulfilment. Evelyn Hope dies, only sixteen years old, without knowing that her lover waited for her ;

but he does not despair. Still less is it possible for death to triumph over mutual love. In *The Ring and the Book*, and *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, and *The Return of the Druses*, and *In a Balcony*, to take the first examples that suggest themselves, tragic catastrophe overtakes the lovers ; but they go down to death exulting, and the promise of complete fulfilment is in their faith.¹

So perfect is Browning's belief in the sure triumph of love over death that he could give it the most familiar clothing, could blend even humour with its undisturbed nobility. *The Householder* is a man's soul dwelling in the "old home" of the body, dreary and savage in his loneliness ; until at last he knows the signal for release in the presence of that soul with which he was mated, but which had passed from earth before him.

"When, in a moment, just a knock, call, cry,
Half a pang and all a rapture, there again were we !—
'What, and is it really you again ?' quoth I :
'I again, what else did you expect ?' quoth She.

'Help and get it over ! *Re-united to his wife*
(How draw up the paper lets the parish-people know ?)
Lies M., or N., departed from this life,
Day the this or that, month and year the so and so.
What i' the way of final flourish ? Prose, verse ? Try !
Affliction sore long time he bore, or, what is it to be ?
Till God did please to grant him ease. Do end !' quoth I :
'I end with—Love is all and Death is nought !' quoth She."

[For Browning as for Shelley, death may unite what life has held asunder ; death means only birth into a fuller life.] Shelley, who loves metaphors drawn from light, images it as a fusing into white radiance of the many-coloured elements of life, or as the lifting of a veil : Browning's most characteristic metaphor shows life, not closing in death, but opening into unknown triumphs, through "one fight more, the best and the last." Of many fine illustrations, perhaps the finest is *Prosipe*.

re Browning's philosophy of life passes over into religion. In human love he finds the clearest revelation, in the finite, of the infinite love which is God, just as in the human will striving towards some dimly dreamed perfection he finds the revelation of a power and a perfection which are absolute. We may apply to him his own admirable description of Shelley : " His noblest and most predominating characteristic is his simultaneous perception of Power and Love in the absolute, and of Beauty and Good in the concrete, while he throws, from his poet's station between both, swifter, subtler, and more numerous films for the connection of each with each than any other modern artificer of whom I have knowledge ; proving how, as he says :

'The spirit of the worm beneath the sod
In love and worship blends itself with God.'"

In that same essay he declares (I think with but slight exaggeration) that Shelley's temper was not only deeply religious, but even Christian. It was *Churchdom*, says Browning, that Shelley attacked ; " had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians." The sharp distinction which Browning draws here between " Churchdom " and Christianity, between dogma and religion, marks his own attitude. Dogma matters little to him personally ; it interests him chiefly as a dramatic artist. He studies sympathetically the widest varieties of religious belief and experience ; in each he finds something of revelation, in none perfect revelation. Caliban's critical reflections on Setebos are instructive and interesting to him, and so in no less degree are the meditations on predestination of Johannes Agricola, and the experiences of the visionary in *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*. But

as in all effort there is the promise of triumph, as in all love there is the promise of fulfilment, so in all honest belief—yes, even if it takes the form of apparent unbelief—there is the promise of the perfect truth. If the finite mind could express the whole truth, it would mean that there is no infinite. All grasp some limited aspect of truth, seeing as in a glass darkly. The divergences are due to the faulty medium which obscures more than it can reveal. But what matters chiefly is the sense of something above man towards which he must strive ; and to this all bear witness, Cleon and Karshish and Paracelsus, Renan and the dying St. John, the heretic John of Molay blazing at the stake and the orthodox spectator who mocks him, even the worldly Blougram and the charlatan Sludge. Here, as in his view of the conduct of life, as in his view of love, all that greatly matters is the effort, the vigorous upleap of the spirit towards whatever gleam of spiritual truth is vouchsafed it. The old claim for individuality, for courage and honesty, holds here too. He has nothing but scorn for the merely nominal believer, or for the easy sceptic ; on the other hand, no faith is too simple, no scepticism too daring, if it is perfectly honest and the result of vigorous experience. In character complexity attracts him ; but in religion he loves, as well as complex products, the simple rapture of David, the serene faith of Pompilia, the happy fervour of Pippa, the inspired certainty of Abt Vogler :

“There shall never be one lost good ! What was, shall live as before ;
The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound ;
What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good
more ;
On the earth the broken arcs ; in the heaven, a perfect round.”

This is merely a dramatic expression of a single mood ; but the faith it expresses informs all his work. It is the attitude inevitable to his spiritual nature. Browning, one of the strongest intellects of his century, knew the limits of the intellect. His religious belief finds support in reason, as it does in the religious experience of others, and in Christian doctrine. But it does not depend on any of these things ; it is his own personal revelation, the answer of his own spirit out of a knowledge that lies deeper than any other possession. *Abt Vogler* expresses Browning's own position. The musician hears the organ-music that he makes, and recognises the wonder of its beauty. He cannot prove anything from it by reason ; but his spirit is quickened to sudden knowledge, and leaps up in triumphant certainty. The infinite promises perfect fulfilment of the finite ; the best in the finite—will and love—are pointers towards the infinite. Love absolute, in absolute might, is God.

“ All thou dost enumerate
Of power and beauty in the world
The mightiness of Love was curled
Inextricably round about.”

This conception of all-powerful love as the supreme power of the universe, a conception so vitally his own, is also the central, ultimate conception of Christianity. Browning believed far more intensely in the essential good in man than in inherited evil ; and some aspects of orthodox Christian doctrine were thus meaningless to him. But like Blake, that other true Christian even more rebellious against orthodoxy, he saw in Christ love incarnate, “ heaven's high ” mingled with “ earth's low.” I do not wish to attempt to define Browning's

theology. I do not believe that he ever defined it exactly to himself. His expressions vary greatly from one poem to another. In the epilogue to *Dramatis Personæ* he seems clearly to declare Christ to be the spirit of love immanent in the universe; answering David, who finds the divine presence in the temple, answering Renan, who finds its influence vanishing, he makes his declaration :

“Why, where's the need of Temple, when the walls
O' the world are that? What use of swells and falls
From Levites' choir, Priests' cries, and trumpet-calls?
That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows.”

On the other hand, in *A Death in the Desert*, he makes the dying St. John declare the doctrine of God in Christ in the orthodox form :

“I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it.”

Here of course he speaks dramatically through the apostle, but the whole poem has the closeness of intellectual texture and the emotional vigour which we find only when Browning's own mind was sympathetically moved. It is entirely in Browning's character to welcome such diversities of mood in himself. To one so fiercely eager to grow, always to grow, any fixed statement of belief would have seemed a fetter and an acknowledgment of weariness. What does emerge clearly, and what alone greatly concerns us, is that Browning believed fervently in an all-loving and all-powerful God, under whom all things work out their

own salvation, striving always towards perfection. His ripest thought finds triumphant expression in the Hebraic fervour and grandeur, transfusing and reconciling the thronging tendencies of new thought, of *Rabbi ben Ezra*. It is Browning's song of the spiritual wisdom that crowns strenuous experience, the blessing for which a man must wrestle with the angel of life.

CHAPTER IX

LIFE, 1861-1869

BROWNING'S loss in his wife's death can be measured only by the singular beauty and completeness of the relation between them. Every circumstance of daily life turned the knife in the wound, for he had not been parted from her for a single day from the moment when she left her home to join him. His faith never faltered, but it could not comfort him in the first pain of the separation ; his tenderness and deep love could only repeat the cry, "I want her, I want her." But he faced bravely the duties which life laid upon him, though its warmth and light had passed. "You know I have her dearest wishes and interests to attend to at once—her child to care for, educate, establish properly ; and my own life to fulfil as properly—all just as she would require were she here. I shall leave Italy altogether for years—go to London for a few days' talk with Arabel—then go to my father and begin to try leisurely what will be the best for Peni—but no more 'housekeeping' for me, even with my family. I shall grow, still, I hope—but my root is taken and remains." Even in the early bitterness of his grief he proved his

belief that love is stronger than death. He counted the time "till I see her again," and knew that his life had already been rich in a whole life's joy. "I *have* had everything, and shall not forget." But he could not bear the familiar scenes which, exhibiting unchanged all that mattered nothing, insisted so poignantly on the change that made all different. "I want my new-life to resemble the last fifteen years as little as possible. . . . My end of life, and particular reward for myself, will be, one day years hence, to just go back to Italy, to Rome, and die as I lived when I used really to live." He made a brief stay in France with his father, and then after a few months in lodgings in London, settled in Warwick Crescent. Gradually, as his vitality reasserted itself in him, the "new growth" which he had courageously foretold began to quicken. In 1864 appeared *Dramatis Personæ*. Some of the poems certainly must date before Mrs. Browning's death; presumably the volume includes such works as he chose to publish of all he had written since *Men and Women* in 1855. It is thus natural that the temper of the poems should vary widely; but no merely chronological division suffices to explain the variation. The volume shows that Browning's faith grew in suffering, though he had to fight his way through moods when every thought was coloured by the aching sense of loss.

"Ah, Love ! but a day
And the world has changed,
The sun's away
And the bird's estranged.
The wind has dropped
And the sky's deranged :
Summer has stopped."

He turns away from Italy as background for his

stories and studies ; he writes of the less noble pains of love—poor tragedies led on by failure in courage and faith, grim comedies where success appears pitiful, such as *James Lee's Wife*, *The Worst of it, Too Late*, *Dis Aliter Visum, Youth and Art*. But this is only one tendency. All the old fighting fervour rings out in *Prospice*, and all the old sure faith in love's triumph over death. He ponders over the lowest type of theology and the shadiest sort of spiritualism, but it is to find something of revelation in the grotesque instincts and guesses of Caliban and the charlatanry of Sludge. Meditation on Christian doctrine finds powerful and beautiful record in *A Death in the Desert*, and the *Epilogue* ; and religious emotion untrammelled by dogma, makes the strong intellect its servant in the magnificent, confident knowledge of God of Abt Vogler and Rabbi ben Ezra.

Browning's removal from Italy to London brought with it many not inconsiderable gains. The sun had gone out of his world ; the day of triumphant living and loving was over ; but in the long twilight which remained he found much of warmth and light at the humbler fires of friendship and intellectual comradeship. Even in the first weeks of deepest suffering, and the dreary months that had somehow to be lived through before his spirit, never despairing but for a time stunned, could find its bearings in a world made unfamiliar by the loss of one supremely loved presence, Browning had every support which could be offered by the sympathetic companionship of his father and the devoted friendship of Miss Isa Blagdon and Miss Arabel Barrett. As time passed his strong vitality asserted itself, and he began, as he had hoped, to live fully in his new circumstances. Gradually he took his

place in London life, moving in that wonderful circle which included Carlyle, Tennyson, the Palgraves, Thackeray, Dickens, Ruskin, Gladstone, Rossetti, Leighton, with many other thinkers and artists. He was drawn not unwillingly into the stream of social functions, dinners, receptions, private views. If his emotional life was starved, his intellectual life received new stimulus ; for Browning's genius, like Chaucer's or Shakespeare's or Goethe's, throve in contact with busy life. At last, too, his genius received recognition. The academic world pressed its honours upon him. He was made Fellow of Balliol in 1867 ; he was twice invited to stand as Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow, and again of the University of St. Andrews. Visits to Oxford and Cambridge find record in letters testifying to the keen pleasure he found in this experience of a life new to him. He received the honorary degree of Doctor from Cambridge in 1879, from Oxford in 1882. More slowly, but surely, his popular fame had also grown. Academic and popular opinion combined in 1881 to pay him the signal honour of the establishment of a Society for the study of his work, the Browning Society.

In a brief record it is impossible to trace the events of Browning's later life ;¹ and none can be selected as vitally significant. His London life was varied by frequent visits to France, and by other visits within Great Britain ; only those can be noted which have left their mark on his literary work. Indeed our record must now resolve itself into a summary account of his literary work, with occasional biographical comment.

¹ A full account may be found in Mrs. Sutherland Orr's *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*.

CHAPTER X

“THE RING AND THE BOOK”

“It lives,
If precious be the soul of man to man.” (Book xii.)

WE have said that Mrs. Browning’s death dried up the springs of Browning’s emotional life. The emotional impetus of the great days in Italy continued, however, combined with superb intellectual energy, in his treatment of a material discovered and first pondered in those happier days. In *The Ring and the Book* (1869) Browning’s powers of dramatic and poetic conception and expression rise magnificently to a task more exacting than any other he attempted.

The opening book explains the title of the poem. Its crude material is drawn from a “square old yellow book,” which Browning found on a second-hand stall in Florence—found, not by chance, though men might call it chance : “a Hand, always above my shoulder, pushed me. . . .” It was a collection of contemporary records, part print, part manuscript, of the trial in 1698 of a Roman nobleman, Guido Franceschini, who had murdered his wife, and in defence pleaded that she was adulterous. To the facts Browning adds nothing. But crude gold needs an alloy to fit it to be worked by hammer and file into a ring ; when the ring is finished a spirit of acid dissolves the alloy, and the beauty of the design is preserved in pure gold. Similarly in this poem (hence its title) the poet has used the added element of his own personality only as a means by the aid of which he has shaped the crude facts discovered

in the old "book"; in the finished work remains no expression of his personal feeling, but purely the gold of essential truth in a form significant and beautiful.

The first book and the last, which finishes off the loose threads of the story and resumes the allegory of the title, thus form a frame to the ten remaining books. These all turn on the same incidents viewed from various standpoints. This method of treatment is unique in poetry, though it was anticipated to some extent by Samuel Richardson in his novels.¹ It would prove fatal in the hands of an artist not gifted with great psychological insight and great power of realizing detail. Browning was endowed even more richly than Richardson with both gifts, and in addition with powers of dramatic narrative and of poetic phrase utterly beyond Richardson's range. Every difficulty of the method merely gives him occasion for a triumph. *The Ring and the Book* stands with *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*, works not merely the greatest of their kind in our literature but unique in kind.

The great value of this method lies first in the way in which an incident, viewed from many standpoints, becomes intimately realized. Every speaker adds new detail, and also throws new light on facts already known. It thus appropriates one of the peculiar sources of vividness of the drama, for in drama too we see the same events through many eyes; but dispensing with the rapidity of action necessary to drama, it elaborates

¹ It has been employed again in the contemporary novel, by Mr. Arnold Bennett in *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways*, and by Mr. Oliver Onions in his *In Accordance with the Evidence* group.

this repercussive effect still further. Secondly (and again the method uses one of the chief means of dramatic economy), since the actual facts cannot change, their changing appearance in the versions of different speakers reveals character in each speaker. Finally, each monologue, while it reveals the speaker's character, also expresses his view of other personages as well as of events. Pompilia, for example, is revealed to us in her own monologue, but we are given additional impressions of her through Guido who hates her, through Caponsacchi who worships her, and in less degree through all the others who touch her more remotely. Thus she grows alive for us in all her being. The danger of the method is that it may degenerate into monotonous repetition. Browning's extraordinarily vivid vision of detail and the catholicity of his psychological interests save him from this danger.

The central figure is the murdered girl Pompilia. She has been adopted as a baby, as a means of evading the law in regard to inheritance, by an old couple, citizens of Rome, Pietro and Violante Comparini. When she is twelve, Count Guido Franceschini, an impoverished elderly nobleman, makes proposals for her hand in the belief that her dowry will be considerable. Pietro refuses, but Violante brings about the marriage in order to secure an aristocratic settlement for Pompilia. Pietro cannot pay the dowry expected; but as he loves the girl and wishes to keep near her, he makes over his possessions to Guido on the understanding that he and Violante share the home at Arezzo. Pompilia has submitted blindly; repelled by Guido, but utterly unconscious of the meaning of marriage, she thinks only of pleasing Violante. The farce quickly grows tragic. Guido, whose mean and

savage nature has been made worse by a life of fruitless waiting for fortune, is furious that he has overreached himself. He vents his malignity on Pietro and Violante, who are at length driven to return impoverished to Rome. Pompilia remains, the victim on whom every evil instinct in Guido wreaks itself. His one desire is to get rid of her without forfeiting his claims for her dowry. The obvious means is to convict her of infidelity. Through a waiting-woman who hates her and who is his own mistress, he tries to draw her into intrigue with a young canon, Caponsacchi, who is reputed gallant. Her innocence saves her. The spell of her personality makes Caponsacchi, who sees her once in the theatre, turn with disgust from his frivolous life ; he never questions that she is ignorant of the messages and letters which are sent to him in her name. At last he goes to a pretended assignation in order to denounce Guido, whom he expects to find at hand in hiding. Pompilia on her side also follows a forged message, because the time has come when she must throw herself on the mercy of any man rather than stay with her husband. For her own life she cares nothing ; but now she knows herself the vessel of another life, and for that all her numbed endurance changes to passionate protective instinct. To save her unborn child she must save herself ; she is utterly cut off from friends, and in desperation determines to see her supposed lover and appeal to his humanity for help. At the first meeting she recognizes his truth as he recognizes hers. She implores him to help her to escape to Rome. Sense of his priestly duty makes him hesitate, but there is no other way. Guido's wiliness makes their flight easy ; it is part of his plan. But he pursues and overtakes them at an inn where, thinking

all safe, Caponsacchi has made the worn-out Pompilia rest for a night. Their perfect innocence has been given the appearance of guilt ; but Guido cannot wreak his hatred fully until his child is born, for only through it can he secure Pompilia's heritage. At the trial, the worldly and sensual judges never doubt that the fugitives are guilty, but regard the affair as a joke. Pompilia is sent to a convent, and Caponsacchi relegated to Civita Vecchia. It seems as though Pompilia were indeed saved. From the convent she is allowed to go to her adopted parents' house, and there her son is born. To ensure his safety from Guido she sends him away when he is two days old. The child's birth, and a suit by Pietro for release from obligation to pay Guido the balance of the dowry, combine to precipitate the catastrophe. Guido hires four ruffians ; they find the house outside Rome where Pompilia is living with Pietro and Violante, and gain entry through pretence of bringing a letter from Caponsacchi. They murder the two old people and mortally wound Pompilia, leaving her for dead. She lives long enough to tell all her story. The murderers are captured with evidence of guilt too clear for dispute. Guido has to rely on the plea of justification by his wife's alleged adultery, declaring that the birth of her child made his action inevitable to a man of honour.

The ten monologues, which with the two framework books make up the poem, all fall in time between Guido's arrest and his execution. Books II, III and IV tell the story from the points of view of three typical members of the Roman public. "Half-Rome," personified as a jealous husband, accepts Guido's statement of facts and defends his action. "The other Half-Rome," from the standpoint of a young bachelor

touched by Pompilia's story, condemns Guido. "Ter-tium Quid," a representative of the governing class, whose interest is detached and merely intellectual, sums up with cold impartiality. Each type is admirably suggested, and each judgment is plausible ; Browning shows clearly what different opinions might be formed on the same evidence, though the poem ultimately leaves no doubt of his own attitude.

Books V, VI, and VII give respectively the evidence of Guido, of Caponsacchi, and of Pompilia. These three, with Guido's second monologue (Book XI), are the greatest in the poem ; each is perfect in its kind, and in its kind unequalled within literature known to me. The character of Guido grows into terrifying life before us, every element clear in the appalling complex : mean and sensual, cynical, infinitely crafty, savagely ferocious, stubborn, yet abject before the immediate face of death. His defence, with every phrase picked for its audience of Churchmen, with its plausible suggestion of honourable motives, its calculated outbursts, its weighed simplicities, is wonderfully conceived and executed. The second monologue, after his condemnation, completes the terrible picture. When he has lost all hope of escape, his hate bursts forth in a flood that covers his murdered victims, his judges, all mankind, God himself—to turn to terror still more dreadful as the guards approach to lead him to execution. His frenzied despair recalls Marlowe's greatest scene, when Faustus sees his doom. It rises to a climax beyond praise ; Guido's last words are screams for help to all he has blasphemed : "Christ,—Maria,—God, . . . Pompilia, will you let them murder me ? "

The character of Caponsacchi needs no comment ; it emerges clearly from his monologue and Pompilia's

references. The dramatic quality of his speech, though less intense, is no less fine than that of Guido's. Browning has never made the rhythms of blank verse express emotion more fully and subtly than in this speech. And in Pompilia's monologue he gives perfect expression to a character more poignantly moving, more piteous in its beautiful, broken youth than any in our literature. Not even Juliet or Clarissa Harlowe, not even Tess Durbeyfield or Dahlia Fleming, grows so deeply into our heart. Her sweet childish tenderness, her uninstructed innocence, her endurance, her power of rebellion for her child's sake, her inviolable purity, her sublime love for her friend, her passion of wonder and worship over her baby, her divine pity which understands and forgives even Guido, her utter simple faith in God—what words other than Browning's do not profane them ?

The eighth book gives relief from the emotional tension. It is the monologue of Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, counsel for Guido, jolly and fat and learned ; whom we see preparing his speech, while his mind turns constantly to his chubby rogue of a son. It is certainly not poetic, but it is admirable character study ; in prose Fielding might have been proud of it. There is fine irony in making Guido's advocate a man so kindly, though coarse ; in opposing to Pompilia, whose motherhood dominates her being, a man who dotes on his own son. The irony is more bitter and the material less pleasant in the next book, which gives the speech of the public prosecutor. His business is to disprove Guido's alleged justification by proving Pompilia's innocence, but his aim is merely to display his cleverness. He drags the slimy trail of his base mind over Pompilia's actions, suggesting evil in order to explain

it away, angry that he has really "nothing to excuse, reason away and show his skill about." These two books are the least attractive in the poem, but they help to complete the many-coloured web of motive and feeling; Browning makes us see the petty emotions which cling to the fringe of tragic events, as well as the greatly good and evil forces which clash in the actual catastrophe. Book X is the monologue of the Pope, Innocent XII, to whom Guido vainly appeals from the judgment of the court. It sets forth the view of mature spiritual wisdom. We feel that it expresses Browning's own thought, though it is dramatically quite proper to Innocent. Pompilia he pronounces "perfect in whiteness"; Caponsacchi, though blameworthy for his early frivolousness, a gallant soldier of God in his service of Pompilia. With the gravest sense of his responsibility, he condemns Guido and his accomplices to execution:

"I may die this very night—
And how should I dare die, this man let live?"

Of the remaining three books I have already spoken, and lack of space forbids fuller discussion. I have described rather than criticized, because my desire is to gain new readers for the poem. Its imposing bulk, and its arrangement, by which the greatest things are reached only after three preliminary books not immediately attractive, frighten away many who might love it greatly. Such readers I would advise to turn first to the books of Caponsacchi and Pompilia, and the two books of Guido. It seems impious thus to dismember the work, but I believe that these books would lead the reader to make the work his own in all its harmonious completeness. The Englishman capable of

appreciating great poetry who does not know *The Ring and the Book* resembles one who dwells beside a mountain from whose summit can be seen a view of infinitely various beauty, and who will not make the effort to climb.

CHAPTER XI

LATER LIFE AND WORK

WITH the publication of *The Ring and the Book*, Browning reached the highest point of his achievement. In all that follows there is characteristic and often great work; the old splendour of thought and feeling fused at white heat flashes out at times even to the very end, blazing into magnificence in the last lines he wrote, the famous Epilogue to *Asolando*. But these occasional outbursts of old fire only reveal the more distinctly the general cooling and hardening of his imagination. In most poets the proportion of intellectual to emotional elements increases as maturity passes into age. In Browning, for the reason we emphasized in speaking of his wife's influence and of her death, the tendency is particularly marked. In *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871), with its later connection *Ari tophanes' Apology* (1875), Browning turns from the somewhat far-sought material he usually prefers, to great classical subjects. He shows in this new field, no less than in the old, width of knowledge, vividness of apprehension, and appropriate tenderness or vigour of expression. In this connection, by anticipation, may be named also his translation (1877) of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus—an interesting but unsatisfying version, uncompromisingly literal in phrase and precisely on that account inadequate to

reproduce the artistic values of the original. His interest in psychological problems builds itself new monuments in the subtle study of Louis Napoleon in *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* (1871), and in the still more masterly treatment of a subject even more complex and difficult in *Fifine at the Fair* (1872). These studies of characters in which the ignoble elements preponderate, though intellectually fascinating and strewn with fine poetic passages, remain less attractive than the earlier, less extended studies of the same kind, such as *Bishop Blougram's Apology* and *Mr. Sludge the Medium*. The effect is rather that of wonderfully brilliant analysis than of living creation. We are made to understand the thoughts and feelings of Louis Napoleon and of Don Juan ; but we are made to live through the experiences of Blougram and Sludge. Similar attraction towards a somewhat stubborn and unpleasant material is shown in *Red Cotton Nightcap Country* (1873), a suicide story scarcely less strong dramatically than *The Ring and the Book*, but far below it in the poetic power which lifts the terrible to the level of great tragedy. Even more powerful and more unrelievedly grim is *The Inn Album* (1875), Browning's nearest approach to the realism which records life without interpreting it.

These longer poems, however, form only part of Browning's work during this period. Other interests, other emotions and thoughts found expression in shorter poems, collected and published in 1876 under the title of the longest of them, which stands first in the volume. *Of Pacchiarotto, and how he worked in Distemper*, is Browning's triumph in grotesque comedy. The story of Pacchiarotto serves to introduce a rejoinder to his own critics. A rejoinder ? A comic massacre, in which

Browning multiplies himself to a whole avenging army, pours down irresistibly on the critic-chimney-sweeps, tumbles them over, rolls them in their own soot, thwacks and belabours them, to the accompaniment of his most uproarious laughter. His Pegasus is a plunging donkey, his weapons a bladder and a bauble with a thistle tied to its fool's head ; never was such slaughter, and so little harm done ! The piece is no more a poem than Sir Hudibras is a representative of chivalry ; but it remains a wonderful monument to Browning's good temper, explosive energy, and extraordinary fertility in grotesque rhymes. Something of the same truculence finds expression in the *Epilogue* ; in *At the Mermaid*, where Browning slashes at Byron and all pessimistic *poseurs* ; and in the poems *Shop* and *House*, where Browning declares most emphatically that the poet's life is his own concern, that the public must in decency accept what is offered to them in the poet's work without nosing into his privacy. Of biographical incident bearing on the poetry, it may be recalled that *Red Cotton Nightcap Country* was written through one of his visits to Normandy. In 1872 (as in the year before and the year after) Browning and Miss Browning visited St. Aubin. It was here (at the "St. Rambert" of the poem) that Antoine Mellerio ("Miranda"), the Paris jeweller, had committed suicide in 1870 ; the details of his tragic story emerged in a suit concerning his will, in the summer of 1872. Miss A. Thackeray, also a visitor of St. Aubin, had been struck by the head-dress of the Normandy peasants, and talked of writing a story called "White Cotton Nightcap Country." The quaintness of the title attracted Browning. He modified it to suggest the clash between incident and setting, splashing with red "the righteous flat of insipidity,"

in his story of the tragedy which had turned sleepy peace to horror. Miss Thackeray's share in the idea of the title is recalled by the dedication to her, and by the form of the story, which is written as though told to her.

Another friendship received commemoration of a very different kind in *La Saisiaz*. Miss Ann Egerton-Smith, an acquaintance of Browning from the days in Florence, had become one of his close friends after his return to London. The special bond between them was their love of music. It was in great measure through Miss Egerton-Smith's thoughtfulness, which often saved him from the incidental discomforts of concert-going, and through the added pleasure of sympathetic companionship, that Browning gave himself at last full indulgence in the art which even more than painting inspired him to fine poetic expression. On several occasions she met Browning and his sister on their holidays, and from 1874 onwards they joined forces each summer and shared a house. In 1877 they took in this way a house near Geneva called "La Saisiaz" (Savoyard for "the sun"). Here, with shocking suddenness, while preparing for an expedition with her friends, Miss Egerton-Smith died of heart-disease. The catastrophe inevitably stirred Browning to deep grief and to earnest reflection on the problem of death; and both found expression in the poem *La Saisiaz*, dedicated "to A. E.-S." It was never Browning's habit to "unlock his heart" in verse; and even here, though the occasion of the poem is personal and emotional, it is the intellectual element that gives character to the poem. Elegy loses itself in the immense and instant question of the immortality of the soul: "Was ending ending once and always when you died?" Browning's

faith in this matter is expressed in many other poems. In *La Saisiaz*, and only here, he seeks not to record his belief but to investigate its foundations intellectually. He leaves out of the question Christian revelation, even—for him far more important—the unprovable unanswerable instincts of the soul, and discusses the matter from the standpoint of a rationalistic deist. Assuming the existence of God and of the soul, he argues that certainty about a future life is withheld because it would hinder the soul in its self-fulfilment in this life; while the being of God gives ground for the hope which is all the soul needs for this life. The poem contains much fine thought strikingly expressed; but it fails philosophically on the one hand by its assumptions, on the other by its exclusion of non-intellectual evidence, and poetically by its untransfigured argument. Thought must become so passionate that reason itself is an emotion, before it can produce great poetry. The long debate of *La Saisiaz*, with its uncertainly hopeful solution, cannot compare in imaginative force or in energy of expression with *Abt Vogler* or *Rabbi ben Ezra* or *Prospice* or the Epilogue to *Asolando*, or any other of the poems in which Browning recorded what he knew, not what he thought. “The rest may reason, and welcome: ‘tis we musicians know.”

Something of the same comparative coolness of imagination marks *The Two Poets of Croisic*, published with *La Saisiaz*. The style is admirably vigorous and racy; and the story of Gentilhomme and Desforges gives pleasant food for meditation on the vanity of fame; but there is nothing in the tale or the telling to stir emotion or warm the imagination. Only at the close Browning’s joy in all energetic and positive experience emerges in verses rugged but forceful:

and in the prologue and epilogue, his faith in the power of love to transfigure and perfect human life expresses itself with appropriate beauty and intimate charm. As always in his lyrics in praise of love, Browning proves his power of original and suggestive phrase and of easy mastery of music.

In August of 1878, after seventeen years, Browning at length revisited his beloved Italy. He could not bear to visit Florence or Rome ; but he returned to scenes less painfully dear in Asolo and Venice. He had not seen Asolo for forty years ; but he remembered the echo which he had discovered in a ruined tower on the hill-top, "and it answered me as plainly as ever, after all the silence." Only echoes of his youth, only memories of his happiest manhood, rippled the deeper silence in his soul. Even the sweet strong voice of Italy could not speak its old message to him. He had changed ; he had grown old. His intellectual energy never failed even in this last period, but it was content to grapple with smaller tasks. The great poems, greatly planned and executed without flagging, were now all written. Short dramatic poems he still produced of a power unexcelled except by his own earlier work ; and he exploited new material, that of comparatively commonplace life, in *Ned Bratts, Halbert and Hob, Martin Rolph, Tray, Donald*. The *Dramatic Idyls* (first series 1879, second series 1880), and *Jocoseria* (1883), in which these poems appeared, show Browning's essential philosophy of life unchanged ; repeatedly we see the importance of the moment of stress which tests and reveals the ultimate qualities in character. But the problems are simplified. Earlier he loved to draw richly complex character ; now he turns to compara-

tively simple types. The old dramatic power shines undiminished in *Adam, Lilith, and Eve*, and *Cristina and Monaldeschi*, and intermittently in *Ned Brat's* and *Iván Ivánovitch* and a dozen other poems. The combination of strength and tenderness, of passion and thought, which makes Browning's love-poetry unique, reveals itself again in *Never the Time and the Place and the Loved One all Together*. But these best things of the later volumes only repeat old triumphs, and the magnificent certainty of touch of the great mature work is gone. *Ferishtah's Fancies* (1884) re-embodies Browning's characteristic doctrines in parable form, interspersed with love-poems full of beauty and spiritual power. The zest for character-study and the power of sympathetic insight which inspired so much of his work from *Paracelsus* to *The Ring and the Book*, still marks the best passages of *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day*, notably that with Christopher Smart. But the predisposition towards unfamiliar subjects, and towards analysis too subtle in matter and too involved in expression for lucidity, has grown more marked ; the power of luminous phrase has waned ; and unhappiest change of all, the dramatic quality of the earlier work gives way to descriptive exposition which too often becomes tedious.

When once he had broken down the barrier of memories that shut him out of Italy, Browning with his sister returned repeatedly. The kindness of an American friend, Mrs. Bronson, relieved them of the discomforts of hotel life in Venice ; she found rooms for them first near and then in her own house, and her circle added new friends to his own. The long day of Browning's life was almost done, but it closed tranquilly in warm

and mellow light. One by one his old friends died ; but his son's marriage in 1887 gave him a new personal hold on the future, as it gave him again a true home in Italy. Age was gently and imperceptibly preparing his body for death, but his spirit lived serenely and cheerfully alike in his social occupations and in his intenser life as a poet. In the autumn of 1889 he paid his last visit to Asolo ; and there he gathered together his latest work in the volume *Asolando*. The Prologue mourns the vanishing of the "dower of dyes" which in youth "ran in glory," round all created things ; "and now a flower is just a flower. . . ." But the Epilogue flares out with ardour as fiery as in youth ; like his own Paracelsus, he dies triumphing.

It was in his son's house at Venice that the end came. His final illness—bronchitis complicated by irregularity of the heart's action—lasted only a month ; and he remained cheerful and suffered little. He died on December 12, 1889. With every tribute of honour from Italy, his body was removed to England, and buried in the Poet's Corner on December 31st.

On the day of Browning's death had appeared *Asolando* ; to those who love him the Epilogue gives deathless greeting.

"At the midnight in the silence of the sleep-time,
When you set your fancies free,
Will they pass to where—by death, fools think, imprisoned—
Low he lies who once so loved you, whom you loved so.
—Pity me ?

Oh to love so, be so loved, yet so mistaken !
What had I on earth to do
With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly ?
Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drivèl
—Being—who ?

o never turned his back but marched breast forward,
r doubted clouds would break,
dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would
umph,
e fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
 Sleep to wake.

noonday in the bustle of man's work-time
t the unseen with a cheer !
n forward, breast and back as either should be,
and thrive !' cry 'Speed,—fight on, fare ever
 There as here !'"

SHORT LIST

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